Reflections /Advice on Writing

14 of West Virginia's most celebrated writers in one content-rich file

Advanced level: Suitable for teachers and older students

This file makes it easy for students and others to compare the writers' reflections on writing, writing habits, influences, attitudes about language, and general thoughts about writing. When you listen to the entire program, you also get stories about growing up, many readings from the writer's work, etc. In this file, we have separated out what they have to say about the writing process itself. Their comments demonstrate that there is no one "right" writing process, but there are many useful rules of thumb.

All these people were interviewed by producer Kate Long. When necessary for context, her questions are included, in italics. Otherwise, all comments come directly from the writers. Passages from their writing are included, printed in blue, when they are needed as context for the writer's comments.

We hope each file makes you want to listen to the entire program, available at www.wvstories.com.

This material comes from the WV Public Radio series, In Their Own Country*, featuring 14 of West Virginia's greatest writers. This file is just one part of the deep, illuminating conversations with these writers. Their hour-long programs are full of readings from their writing and stories from their lives, waiting for you, free and 24/7, at* www.wvstories.com.

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Irene McKinney

The interviewer's question or comments are included, in italics. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Irene McKinney. Irene offered her advice to writers, using specific poems as examples. So those poems are included here.

The audio tracks for this advice are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation with Irene McKinney, at www.voicesofwv.org . The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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1 I wanted to believe that I would be a writer when I grew up. It seemed almost too wonderful a thing to actually happen. But I went around telling people that I was going to be a writer. And I think I told them that before I'd written very much at all.

Anytime anybody asked me, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" I would say, "I'm going to be a writer!" I stated certain fantasies and made certain fantasies come true. Just by talking about them, imagining about them, speculating.

2 *Irene said her early life on a rural farm got her used to solitude. A writer has to enjoy solitude – and books - she said.*

I loved the freedom of wandering around in the woods, that sense of knowing that I could go off and do whatever it was that I wanted to do. Usually it was just taking the dogs out in the woods, going out to pick walnuts, going up in the apple trees in our orchard and sitting all day eating apples, picking raspberries. All those things were like, I could be a self-starter, and nobody told me not to.

And also it got me used to solitude. And one of the things that has been puzzling to me in contemporary life is seeing so many people who are absolutely terrified of solitude and would do anything to avoid it.

What is solitude to you?

Somehow knowing that your own company is probably pretty good, and that you can come up with interesting thoughts and ideas all by yourself, really.

But of course, in my solitude, I always had books. For me, to go off someplace with a book was just the height of pleasure. I remember reading a book that my dad had about sheep shearing, and I just read it because it was there, and it was a book, and I considered anything printed, between covers, to be magical, valuable, and wonderful. So I read it. He also had a book on the repair of farm machinery, which I remember clearly. It had a blue cloth cover. And I read that! We had an old copy of Byron's poems, and I read that! We also had an old copy of Edgar Allen Poe's work, and I read that!
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3 I read everything that comes to me, constantly, almost without discrimination.

4 *Did you try to write poems when you were a kid?*

Yeah, I did. I started somewhere around the age of 10 or 11. And I remember sitting down one afternoon up in my room. And I was looking at a poem written in rhyme and using that as a model. And I tried to duplicate that. And I thought, "I can do this." And I remember at some point thinking, "God, this is hard. I didn't know this would be so hard!" And I could feel my brain reaching and trying to expand, to try to encompass this new kind of mental experience.

5 Paying attention to what's around you is, I think, maybe number one on the list of things you need to be doing when you're writing a poem.

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6 *Irene's poems are like can openers. She starts with something ordinary, something grounded, something we know, like a stone or an owl or coal mining, and then uses her poem to peel back the lid and show us something below the surface that we hadn't seen before.*

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Deep Mining

Think of this: that under the earth
there are black rooms your very body

can move through. Just as you always
dreamed, you enter the open mouth

and slide between the glistening walls,
the arteries of coal in the larger body.

I knock it loose with the heavy hammer.
I load it up and send it out

while you walk up there on the crust
in the daylight and listen to the coal-cars

bearing down with their burden.
You're going to burn this fuel

and when you come in from your chores,
rub your hands in the soft red glow
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and stand in your steaming clothes
with your back to it, while it soaks

into frozen buttocks and thighs.
You're going to do that for me

while I slog in the icy water
behind the straining cars.

Until the swing-shift comes around.
Now, I am the one in front of the fire.

Someone has stoked the cooking stove
and set brown loaves on the warming pan.

Someone has laid out my softer clothes,
and turned back the quilt.

Listen. There is a vein that runs
through the earth from top to bottom.

and all of us are in it.
One of us is always burning.

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How did you know the details to put in that poem?

I just picked them up through my life, through the general culture of mining, and having uncles who were miners, and hearing reports on the radio, and community talk.

"One of us is always burning..."

Yeah. I didn't realize this at all. This is one of the odd things that can happen with writing poetry. When I wrote it, I was thinking more about personal relationships. How in personal relationships, it always seems, that at any given moment, one person has the power and the other is slaving in some way to please the other. And how this can be reversed, suddenly, as in the swing shift image. Then everything turns around. Everything turns upside down.

But later on, maybe 5 years after I wrote the poem, somebody said to me: "This is a mythical poem about the journey to the underworld." And in many ways, I'm sure that it is. You go to the underworld, you go to the unconscious, to find things, to bring back up to the surface.

And my idea of chopping these things loose and carrying them back up. It's a great labor to write in an original way, to mine this stuff and bring it up to the surface and **do** something with it, turn it into fuel or whatever.

And the third dimension to the poem came to me after I started teaching the course in Appalachian Lit. I think it's a political poem too, about the levels of power in a culture. The people who provide the fuel don't get acknowledged. They work hard, they strain hard, they're pushing these loads of things, whatever these loads of things are.

All the work that gets done in our society is hardly acknowledged at all. And the people who are the recipients of all this good stuff stand around in front of the fireplace and rub their hands together.

So I think, really, I don't want to brag on this poem, but it does work on three levels at least.

7 *How can it be that you can find meaning in something that you wrote, years later?*

I think that, in certain kinds of very intense lyric poetry, the poem knows better than I do. That is – I've heard many poets say this – if you're paying attention to whatever it is that the poem is demanding of you, it knows much more than you do. Actually, what I think happens is that, when you're hot, when you're writing rapidly, with intense energy, all the best parts of you are clicking together. Then when you quit, you drop back to your usual ordinary state. So, as a person in my ordinary state, I might not see everything that's in that poem, until later on, when I learn a little more in my life. And then I look back at the poem and say, "Oh, that's what I meant."

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9 *Some people say writing helps them make sense of life. Do you agree with that?*

I think, probably, for those of us who write, we've made a decision sometime in our lives, either consciously or unconsciously, that this is the way we're going to understand the world. And so anything that's going on needs somehow to be interpreted by a poem or a story or an essay.

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10 *Stained*

I'm stained with the iron-red water from the mines
and I'm stained with tobacco and red wine and
the rust of perpetual loss. Near Mabie,
West Virginia I pulled off the narrow road one
morning on my way to work as a substitute teacher.
I wanted to stand there awhile to see how bad
it was, my shuddering in ten-degree weather
on my way to something that couldn't

possibly matter. I had quit smoking and I felt
like a squirrel about to be shot, looking around
in a frenzy. There was a squirrel there, not
afraid at all, turning a hickory nut in its
hands and ignoring me. I must've looked
like what I was, a woman who had lost her
bearings and refused to admit it. It was
another day in my history of posthumous
days, another day when nobody touched my body.

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11 One of the things I've been thinking a lot about is: I no longer care to come out sounding wonderful in a poem. Come out smelling like a rose. I think there's always that impulse in a poet's writing. But I'm not trying to be wonderful. I'm not trying to be anything more than I am, which is, an ordinary person with ordinary desires and ambitions. So it's very precious to me that I be just as truthful as I can about the unpleasant things in my life. The times when I was depressed and confused and going in the wrong direction. I'm trying to use the poem as a place where I could see clearly. I'm painting a picture in this poem of a woman, a car, a squirrel, and cold air.

Why would you not just write abstractly about that and just say, "Oh I feel confused" and sort of discuss it? Why do we need the squirrel and the car and the cold air?

Well, if my own reading experience is any gauge of that, I would just say, "Well, I don't care." If somebody told me that, I would say, "Well, that's too bad, but I don't really understand fully what you mean, and I don't care."

A good piece of writing makes you care, because not about a thing, it *is* the thing. A thing Robert Lowell said once, about poetry, he said, "Poetry is not *explaining* about something. It *is* the thing itself. A thing *happens* to you when you read a poem. Or it should.

So what did you put in that poem to make it happen?

There are several things that are very real in this poem and that I hope will bring it to life for other people. One of them is the iron-red water. On the property I live on, there's a vein of coal under the house. So when we dug a well, rusty, iron-red water came up. So I have iron-red water. The mines themselves always cause iron-red water, which pollutes the streams.

And I say I'm also stained with tobacco, which is quite true. I was a lifelong smoker. And red wine. I occasionally drink red wine.

And, I say, the rust of perpetual loss. If you name three real things, you may have earned the right to use an abstraction.

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16 The poet Gary Snyder was very important to me. And the reason he was important to me was, it made me feel like I had permission to write about rural life. So many of the poems I was reading were about city life or didn't seem to take into account the natural world in any way. Or if it did take into account the natural world, it was just kind of like a decoration. It was something in the background. But to me, the natural world was in the foreground. When I would go down to the barn and spend time with the cattle, with the workhorses, also we usually had some hound dogs down there, these were important characters in my life. And their life processes were important to me.

Gary Snyder – in talking about rural life and tribal life and traditional kinds of life, farming and living off the land – made me suddenly realize that I could write about that, that I could bring that into my poems.

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24 Irene went to college at West Virginia Wesleyan, still writing, still trying to figure out what kind of attitude to have toward her farm upbringing. She got married, had two kids, got a Ph.D. Then at some point, she was a young, divorced mother with two kids. And she was desperate for time to write. The things she had no time to write woke her up in the middle of the night.

Irene said that to be an artist, she had to, first, she had to commit to finding the time needed.

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25 *Waking Up Sweating*

I have been sleeping and
laboring in a nest of hair
wound in my gown, the pillows
caught on the glare from
the streetlight, a pale-red
animal framed in the doorway.

It is 2 AM. The children
squirm in their beds with
the heat. The relief of

waking dries off me like sweat,
and I know that all the things
I can't say or write
squeal in my sleep
and slap the soles of my feet,
begging for breath.

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"All the things I can't say or write squeal in my sleep and slap the soles of my feet, begging for breath…" Irene McKinney made time to say those things and give them breath. She decided to write about what she knew, no matter what anyone thought about it.

26 *Her first nationally-published book of poems, The Girl with the Stone in Her Lap, was rooted in the farming community she knew. It was well received. People at the University of California invited her to teach there for a year. They said she had a fresh, original voice. To her amazement—and relief— she found that Californians not only did not look down on her mountain farm background, they envied her for it. They reinforced her determination to write about what she knew.*

People who come from a rootless culture are fascinated by, and maybe envy rooted cultures. I didn't really realize that I had a very rich kind of background and heritage until I got away from it and began to miss it. I saw how valuable to me this experience of growing up in this particular way was.

And through West Coast eyes, she looked back at West Virginia.

I think that it's maybe necessary to step entirely out of your own culture in order to begin to fully see it. I physically felt that I was looking back to the east and seeing this little area and seeing how precious it was to me and how much it had done to form all my values and the way I felt about the world, and the way I felt about other people, and what my hopes and aspirations were, all these things which, actually, I had denied up until that time.

She began to truly appreciate - in an unsentimental way - the rural community where she grew up, along Talbott Road in Barbour County: where families shared party lines, a community center, a church, special events like corn shuckings and bonfires, and just helped each other get by from day to day.

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34 *A good poem, every time I read it, I see something different.*

I do too. And that's true with my own poems too. The more I read them, and the more I think about them, the more they have to teach me, I think.

Isn't that funny?
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One theory that I have is that our deepest, deepest desire is to know the truth. And then we have some other desires up above that deepest, deepest desire which don't want us to know the full truth. Because it's going to be too difficult. It's going to change our lives. It's going to change our relationship with somebody else. It's going to make us have to work hard at something. And so we would rather avoid it. When you're writing really well, you go ahead and tell yourself those secrets. And so you can look back at your own poem, and the poem has something to tell you in a conscious way that you didn't really know before.

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36 People often come up and ask questions after a reading. And they say, "Is that true? Is all that true? Is that about your personal life?" And it's very hard to answer. Because if it were just about your personal life, you could just sit down with friends and relatives and tell them about your personal life. But that's not it, it's cranked up to a higher degree. It uses personal material. All creative writing uses personal material. But it gets transformed in the process.

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38 When you're writing a poem, I don't think you're usually aware that you're going to present it to somebody else. Your audience is some part of yourself at that point. And so it's always a wonderful surprise when you see that somebody responds to this poem. You get up and read it, and people come up and talk to you afterwards. And it takes on a whole new dimension then.

Denise Giardina

The interviewer's question or comments are in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Denise Giardina. All written work by Denise Giardina is printed in blue.

The audio tracks for the Denise Giardina program are available, at www.voicesofwv.org *. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.*

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1 Some of the scenes, they really are - I just love to get into them. Especially when I'm at the meat of something. it's exciting to have these characters banging against each other, is the way I think of it. It's just like throw them in the scene, and just let them bang on each other!

… Writing, for me, is like going underwater. You come up for air eventually and everything is more normal again. So, I'm not sure when I'm writing, that I actually know what I'm writing. I'm just telling a story, but I don't really know what it is.

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2 I'm not sure when I'm writing that I actually know what I'm writing. I'm just telling a story, but I don't really know what it is.

A number of writers have said that, and I think that's hard for a non-writer to understand what that would be. What are you doing when you write?

Basically, I'm following people around. I'm sort of like spying on them, or listening to what they say. Watching what they do. Sometimes I feel like I'm maybe trying to manipulate them a little bit and sort of saying, "What if you did this?" And then I watch them and see what they do.

I know a Charleston man who did a lot of writing once told me that he was writing about a Confederate soldier, and I said, "Well, what's he going to do?" And he said, "I dunno. He hasn't moved yet."

Yeah. That happens a lot. I often think of it as, they haven't told me yet what they're gonna do. I keep waiting for the characters to tell me if they're going to fall in love with a certain person, or if they're going to go to bed with them or not, or what's going to happen. And sometimes it takes them a while to tell me. They go at their own pace, rather than mine.

What do you do to get yourself in a position where you can hear them tell you what they're going to do?

Well, I find, I need to not have a lot of distractions in my life. If I do, then I can't hear the characters. I'm finding now as I get older that I can balance teaching and writing now better than I used to be able to. But I still need a life that's fairly uncluttered. I can be busy, but it can't be stuff that I'm fretting about. If I'm fretting, I can't write.

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6 I really did think it'd be fun to be a writer, but I never dreamed that I could. Because I did think you had to write about sophisticated things. I didn't know of any writers from West Virginia. So I had no role models. And I thought nobody would want to write stories about where I was from. I mean, good grief, that was just the last thing in my mind, that somebody would actually like to read a book that was set in West Virginia. So yeah, I was in my twenties before I started getting enough confidence to start writing.

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13 *Did you feel a personal connection to him [Henry V, of Denise's book,* Good King Harry*]?*

The first time I heard about him [Henry V], I almost felt like it was somebody I knew. And the more I read, the more familiar it sounded. I even had this experience, writing the book, that I would be writing along and not sure where I would be going, and I would go ahead and push it forward. Then I would go back and try to look up some sources and see if I'd gotten it right. And I had!

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19 *You are sometimes described as an Appalachian writer. But you said you feel it's more accurate to be called a theological writer.*

That's the thing that ties all four books together. There are really only two of the four novels that are set in the Appalachian region. And even those deal with international and national issues and people. he Appalachian region's never been isolated, the way the myth sort of has it. And so there's certainly no reason why Appalachian literature should take place in isolation either. But I do think [I am a] woman writer, Appalachian writer, political writer, theological writer… but I think the one that makes the most sense to me is that I write literature that deals with theological questions.

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20 *Denise graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary when she was 28. Instead of getting ordained as a priest, she started writing.*

I don’t think I could have written what I’ve written without being at seminary. Right after I graduated, I started Good King Harry. I’d wanted to write Good King Harry for ten years, but really didn’t know what I was saying in Good King Harry or anything else. It wasn’t till I went to seminary and learned more and thought more, and got exposed to theological questions and ways of thinking, that I was able to get a sense of what I was writing about.

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23 *The existentialists used to talk about committed literature, literature that has a message to the larger society. As a matter of fact, they felt that that was the highest calling of literature.*

I think literature should engage the world. That’s the way I would put it. It should fight with the world. It should, it should come from a place beyond the values of the world, I guess. It should be a world that stands on its own and that challenges the world that we’re in, not that mirrors it necessarily, but that challenges it to be more than what is.

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26 *In this next scene, the inadequate dam that same company built at the head of the holler breaks and sends millions of tons of coal waste water pounding down the holler - just like the actual dam break in Buffalo Creek holler. One of the main characters, a Jesuit priest is trying to warn people when he sees the flood coming.*

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Low water surges ahead of the moving wall and covers the road and the railroad track, laps at the foot of the hillside. Then the wall passes, the sound so loud, I cannot think. My arms are wrapped around a tree, and I hold it in a death grip, though I am above the water that moves so fast, I am dizzy, and I turn away, for my feet want to go from under me, it moves so fast. I see the church. It is only part of a church, a steeple and roof. The current pushes it toward me. A tiny figure clings to the steeple. The roof hits the mountainside, and the child holding onto the steeple reaches an arm to me and screams. Then the water has the roof again and wrenches it away from the bank, back out into the current. I leap into the water. Cold. I grab the roof, pull myself up. He is soaking wet and coated with black muck. I pry him from the steeple, and his arms grip my neck. Hard to breathe. We are moving, whirling, and I am dizzy. The waves wash over us, and my grip loosens. The boy screams.

A trailer tumbling end over end. We rush toward it, and it raises up to crush us. I let go of the roof, and we are free in the water. I go under, up, and the boy screams. Wood is all around. It hits me. Stunning. I grab a tire. We ride fast. A shelf smashes against the side of my head. I go under.

Wider. The sky is wider. The water slows. I go under. The water slows.

The mountain grabs me and lifts me. I hold the boy tight. It is not the boy. The boy? It is not the boy. It sticks in my chest. Wood. Hold it tight. Cold.
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Oh, those are hard to read. That scene, it's one of the hardest things I've written. I wrote it all in a rush, I didn't really stop. Actually I think it's maybe the only thing I never really edited. I just tried to put it out there and not even touch it afterwards. I did go back and look at it, but I just decided not to mess with it.

Wasn't it scary to put yourself there?

It's always hard to write those scenes, the really dramatic scenes I've written, where people die. It's hard because you have to kind of live it yourself with your characters. And usually, it comes toward the end of a book too. By that time, you've gotten to know the characters really well, and you care about them, and you don't want to see them go through stuff like this. So it's very hard to write, those kinds of things.

How do you work yourself up to it?

I just block out the world, really. I don't sit down to write a scene like that unless I have a chunk of time where I can just not be interrupted.

Same thing happened with *Saints and Villains*. I wrote probably the last 25 pages, all in a 24-hour period. just going through it. For something that intense, you have to do that, to keep the intensity yourself. So it's kind of a strategy.

29 *It seems to me that you're right hand in hand with your own characters. Trying to do something about the things that you care about, in more than one way.*

Yeah, I think the things that are important in life are things to be written about and also acted upon too. Just as there's no one right political strategy, there's also no one right way to deal with those things. You can write about them, and you can talk about them. You can be an activist on behalf of them. And so forth. All at once, think.

I do feel called to write the books I write. I don't think I could write them if I didn't because the whole process is such a mystery. It usually doesn't feel like something I'm doing. It feels like something that's been given to me, and I couldn't write a book that someone assigned me. It has to be something that's given to me. I think that's true in a lot of people's lives. If we try to be in tune with the spiritual, then when we listen to what we should be doing, then we go out and do what we're called to do.

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30 One of the hardest things for a writer, I think – and I really realize it, because I go back and read some of this stuff aloud and kid of meet these characters again – is that they're so alive. And when I'm writing the book, they're so alive. And I have all these conversations with them myself. But when you're finished writing, it's almost like they're dead. You don't see them again. You don't talk to them again.
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Richard Currey

The interviewer's question or comments are included, in italics. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Richard Currey. Passages from Currey's writing are included in blue print when needed for context.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.voicesofwv.org . The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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You write about ordinary people, and you give them a lot of dignity.

RC: Well, those are the heroes in stories and in life. Everybody struggles to live their life. They try to put the pieces together, to make it work. And I think that, in ordinariness is often seated a great deal of dignity.

I think people face what happens to them. This is a key tenet that drives my storytelling. And it's in what happens in your life that you discover dignity. Or you discover grace. You discover direction. You learn your largest lessons. Or you don't.

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5 *[following a reading about a man named Tyler whose wife killed herself] People hear an intense story like that, and they automatically think, "This must be something that happened to you."*

Well, it didn't happen to me. It didn't happen to any member of the family. Folks think, well, your grandfather, your uncle, some family myth, some legend. No. No, none of those kind of things. Most of the writing in my life is a process of evolution. It can spring from seeing a man, In this case, an engineer, just standing at the open window of the locomotive passing by. And beginning, for very mysterious reasons, I think, to imagine an entire life for this person. Out of that - out of that single image - came this character of Tyler and the situation that he faced.

When you write it, do you sit and make lists of what might happen to your character? Do you sit and just visualize your character? How do you do this?

I'm very musical. I improvise. I sit and write the way a pianist composing might sit at the keyboard. I start with the very kind of central image that I just told you about and I go with it. And, you know, sometimes it doesn't work. But generally, I'm looking for that point where the character will speak to me. And then I'm not exactly in control of it anymore.

You'll hear this, I think, from many writers, that mystical or quasi-mystical sense that some other kind of energy speaks through you. But I think that's common in any kind of creative art form. It certainly would be true if I were composing music.

I listen for the sound of it. I listen for the chords. I listen for the way the themes move. And when it's affecting me powerfully, and I'm finding that the rhythm is right, the downbeat is correct, the emotional movement is moving for me, then I'm hopeful that that will be true for other people.

Richard says he writes some stories carefully, with many drafts, and others just stream out on the page like jazz.

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13 *Most people who can tell stories heard stories when they were a kid. Who told stories in your life?*

Everybody told stories. Everybody. Everybody at the table. Everybody at the Sunday dinners. Everybody at the Easter picnics. My grandparents would tell the stories of their days growing up, which went back to the turn of the century. My parents would argue over the various fates and destinies of cousins and nephews and wayward uncles and the like. The stories were everywhere. It was an environment. It was like being in a kind of water. I swam in it.

Richard, when you were a kid, did you think that you could or would be a writer?

Absolutely. About the age of 12, I decided that that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a writer. My grandfather, God bless him, I think he recognized that I had talent, even then. He would have me - at the end of a summer day - come down and bore the rest of my family, reading little stories or poems I'd written. He was obviously very proud of these things.

But yeah, I wanted to be a writer. I just liked to do it (laughs). It was really that simple. I liked to do it.

Your grandfather was one of your first and best audiences, wasn't he?

Absolutely correct. Who knows whether this man had any actual sense that his grandson was literally going to become a writer? But he valued that. That's all. He valued it.

His grandfather encouraged him when he was writing songs and was in a teenage band too.

There was a point when I was 16, 17, 18, when I really thought that I wasn't going to be a writer. I was going to be a musician, a composer. The war interrupted all that, but I have felt very strongly that this
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arises out of the same creative place in me and that I use all the same tools for composing a paragraph, a story, a book, as I would composing a piece of music.

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National publications describe Richard's Fatal Light and Crossing over as some of the best writing to come out of Vietnam. Here's a sample:

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16 *On a combat operation with a Marine Corps unit, my platoon comes under fire. I use a US government-issue, non-retractable ballpoint pen to open an airway for a Marine shot in the face and unable to breathe in anything approaching a normal manner. This procedure is done by placing the pen a few centimeters below the cartilege in the lower neck and shoving it directly into the trachea.*

Having done this and established, at least temporarily, a patent airway, I removed the pen and wipe it on my trouser leg and return it to my pocket, in the event it should be necessary for any similar situation in the future. Later that day, I use the same pen for a short report and later that night, to complete the Graves Registration for two Marines who died of their wounds in triage.

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17 *Richard, how, how did you write things like this? How do you remember? How could you stand to remember?*

It took a while to "stand to remember." You know, I wrote nothing about my military experiences, nothing about that period of time until the late 1970s. In fact, I remember being in Morgantown, being a student at West Virginia University, and at the time thinking, "I'll never speak or write about any of this, ever." And I didn't. There were years of writing, learning how to write, writing poetry, publishing, never touched on these issues, never went close to them. Then, I would say, about 1978, is when it just began to pour forth.

Was there a point where you just decided, OK, now I'm going to write about the war?

No, no there wasn't. There were times when I'd write pieces that were about the war, then I didn't for some time. Then I would come back to it. And it gained a kind of life of its own. And I had grown enough, enough time had passed, enough years had gone by that I was able to return to the material. I was able to remember it. I was able to sit with it and not have it be either overwhelming to work with or - in some way, for me - an obscenity, something that I, that I felt for a long time that I shouldn't speak of.

18 *How autographical is your writing about the war?*
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On an emotional, spiritual, and moral level, I would say completely autobiographical. I mean, I use various techniques. I compress characters. Two or three people become one character. Episodes that happened a month apart happened in the same day. Just techniques of fiction. But the essence of these pieces, yeah, they - where they occupy an emotional register - that's strikingly autobiographical.

Did you have to go out on helicopters into firefights to pick people up?

That's one of the key things that medics do in combat situations, is man those helicopters. And, you know, I get off the helicopter and go pick the people up, if they can't get to you, which is often the case.

…. The juxtaposition of the beautiful and the horrible. The sublime and the obscene. You know, wars are fought in beautiful places. Extraordinarily difficult things happen, and at the same moment, you can look up and see the sky, a treeline, something that echoes with beauty. And certainly in *Crossing Over* and *Fatal Light,* I sought to bring those two things together as a constant reminder of that stark and starling combination of experience that is right there, it's together, it's all the time. It's not one thing or the other.

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20 Actually, I think many, many people want to know if writing is cathartic. Or if one writes in search of catharsis. I know people certainly do. I'm sure they do. I hope it's successful. I don't.

You know, I've never had that desire to relieve myself of any particular burden. And in fact nothing I have written has in fact relieved me of any burdens. You know, I think that what happens in one's life is exactly that. I think what we are humanly responsible for, we're responsible for. You carry those things with you forever. You can't make up for anything exactly. You might come to terms with it. You might understand it better. You might make your peace with it. Or not, as the case might be.

For me, writing is not a – it's not therapy. It's not a psychological exercise. It's a creative art form. It drives out of a different place.

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24 *Richard Currey's 1997 novel, Lost Highway, is based on the life of a traveling West Virginia musician - a musician who played that raw, lonesome, early kind of country music.*

Lost Highway was originally a short story that was going to be in *The Wars of Heaven*. And, uh, the story got longer and longer (laughs). It just overflowed its banks.

I grew up in and around country music. I listened to it originally on an Edison Victrola that my grandfather had. These were recordings that were done in the twenties, very, very early versions, very raw, primal country music. Two guys, a guitar and a harmonica, and the most high, wide, and lonesome voices you can imagine.

The original story, though, was about a man who was going to collect his son's body. His son had been killed in Vietnam, and this man happened to be a vintage banjo player. In the original drafts of the story, as he drove - he was driving from WV to Pittsburgh to pick up the casket. And he was reflecting on his own life as a musician. And it grew, his character grew for me, I continued to allow it to develop and move. And soon it was not twenty pages, it was fifty, then it was sixty. And I realized that he wasn't at all going to pick up his son's body, that his son had survived, that his son was coming back. And that that was a key piece of the story I wanted to tell.

25 *Lost Highway* is a book about dues. It's really about any artist's life. I think of it as a wide metaphor for a life devoted to any creative art form.

27 The last few pages of *Lost Highway* are, to my mind, the operative metaphor of the writing life, as well as, I think, in many ways, the musical life. And that is, that we don't know where the stories come from. We don't know where they rise from. And then they're there. They're beautiful, they're nuanced, they're shapely. And yet they don't seem to be about anything that we specifically knew or were experiencing at the time that we wrote them.

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Cynthia Rylant

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation with Cynthia Rylant at www.voicesofwv.org . The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material. Any passages from Cynthia's writing are printed in blue.

This material came from extensive interviews of Cynthia Rylant. The interviewer's question or comments are in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Cynthia Rylant.

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1 *You have such a way of communicating directly to people. Your writing just sounds like you're talking. Do you think about that?*

You know, I always just settle in, deep and quiet, when I write and just, I dunno – respect the heart, you know. … It is kind of a secret unraveling that comes out when you write.

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2 If you're a serious writer, a serious artist, you write about those things that you're deeply moved by. And I think most people are deeply moved by the same things that I'm moved by. I just happen to be the one who was given the ability to put that swelling of the heart, that sweet reverence that you have for those things around you and those people that you live with into some kind of language. And that seems to be my particular gift in this world.

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5 *I think you had some good storytellers to listen to, good models that sunk into your brain.*

That's probably true. And they weren't really long-winded storytellers. They knew how to tell it in just enough words that they got you, they grabbed you, they made you laugh, and they let you go.

6 *You write about ordinary things.*

Well, you know, when you live a sheltered childhood (laughing), you don't have a whole lot of adventures out in the world to write about. You really do have to concentrate on making beautiful what it is that you have. And so, I grew up in a very small community in southern, rural West Virginia. For the first several years of my life, I was out in the country. Nobody had a car. The men went off the mines. They took the vehicles. So we were left to entertain ourselves.

Later, when I moved to a town that had little sidewalks and a drug store and hardware, my mother was a working parent and she was gone all day. And this was true even in the summertime. She was gone all day, and I was an only child, and I was left to my own resources. So, basically, I just kind of walked the roads and got to know people and developed into the person that I am now.
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(followed by several examples of her writing about ordinary things)

14 *Some people have natural storytelling voices and when I ask them about their childhoods, there's always somebody they heard telling stories. Those four years you were living with your grandparents...*

Well, they just liked to reminisce. And I guess that's what storytelling is in a lot of Appalachian families. And so the relatives would come up from Virginia, and everybody would sit around the table, and they'd just laugh about all the trouble Aunt Agnes got into when she was eighteen. And they'd laugh about Uncle Leo and how he liked to take his naps in the back seat of the car parked out in the yard under the cherry tree. They had a history together. They had memories that were all the same, and they loved to relive them. And so as a child, I just got to sit in on all of that.

Sounds wonderful. Lucky you!

Their language was natural. They didn't feel they had to impress anybody. They didn't have to sound smart. They didn't have to sound philosophical. They were just laughing and being themselves, and I think that kind of honesty helped me, as a writer, try not to (laughs) "Don't be so uppity," my grandmother would say. So, all that family influence, I'm sure, had a great deal to do with the kind of writer I turned out to be.

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16 I went through college as an English major thinking I would become a teacher, so I got as much education as you probably need to become a teacher.

I couldn't find a job, so I got a minimum wage job as a clerk in a public library in Huntington, West Virginia. My job was to check out the books, dust the shelves, file the cards, just easy stuff. And, the opening that they had was in the children's department of that library. And I had actually never really seen children's books.

I didn't use the public library when I was growing up because it was in a city. Like I said, I didn't have any transportation. And I grew up on Nancy Drew books. I never realized there were novels, poetry, incredibly artistic picture books for children out there in the world. When I got that minimum wage job as a clerk, I discovered that whole heavenly collection of beautiful art and language that was in the children's room. And having just finished a college degree in English, I'd read the best writers in the world. I had an appreciation for beautiful language. I guess those two things came together, and, for the first time, I wanted to write. I had never wanted to write adult novels or short stories. For the first time, I wanted to write books. And I wanted to write children's books, because I thought they were so perfectly beautiful.
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I started secretly writing at home. I was 23. And I had just gotten out of college, I had just recently married. And I was also expecting a child. All that was going on in that year that I was 23. And I was secretly writing books at home and mailing them out to publishers in NY.

17 *Was your first book* When I Was Young in the Mountains?

Yes, it was. That was the first children's picture book I wrote that I knew was perfect. I had tried to write a few other picture books before then, and they weren't very good. But the day that I wrote that book, I knew that I had made something really beautiful.

19 I sent it off to four different publishing houses hoping that in the thousands of unsolicited manuscripts that they received every month (laughs), somehow my letter and my story would filter up to the top of the pile and an editor would read it. And that's exactly what happened. So I got a letter, I dunno, about four months later after I'd sent out the book from a New York publisher saying that they loved the work and that they wanted to make it into a book. And that was my beginning in children's books.

I can just imagine you opening that letter.

Cynthia: Yeah, I was living on a street in Huntington. My baby was taking a nap. And I opened the letter and read it, and I ran outside, and the postman was about four houses down, and I yelled at him and told him (laughs) what he had just delivered to me. So he was the first person to congratulate me. I still remember what he looked like and everything!

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20 Most writers I've heard speak about themselves and their work usually say that they write every day. I go months without putting a word down on a piece of paper. I wait. I just wait and wait and wait for that feeling inside me. It's hard to explain the feeling. But this day just comes along, and suddenly, I just, I feel like it's the day. It's very hard to explain. I just get kind of restless inside, and I almost feel the tips of my fingers tingling. I pick up my yellow notebook and my pen, and I'll just go find a comfortable place and wait and see what it is that I'm supposed to be putting on the paper.

If it's nice weather, I always sit outside. I don't write a whole lot in the winter because I get a little blue in the winter, like most people, so I'm not at my best creatively. But I do love springtime and summertime for writing a lot. So I'll just go outside with my yellow notebook and my dogs, and we'll sit outside in the back yard or something, and I'll wait. And then pretty soon, I'm writing.
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It's impossible to explain how I thought of the idea, why I thought about writing about a scarecrow that particular day, or why I thought of writing a book of poems about my childhood in Beaver, West Virginia that particular day. That's always just the mystery of it.

Anyway, I'll write it fairly quickly, usually in one sitting. Certainly the picture books I'll write in one sitting. And the poetry books usually in one day. If it's a novel, I will usually spend about a month on it. I won't write every day. I won't force that out. But I will sit down every two or three days and see if I can get another chapter out. And once it's finished, I type it up, and mail it off. And my work is done, and I turn back to my life.

22 I have this image of all these beautiful stories and poems, up there. And you know, they've just been there forever. They always have been. And sometimes a person is lucky enough to take the right road and go up there to heaven and find a story and bring it back to earth.

Sometimes I have that image in my head, that, uh-oh, I just found another story that was living up there. Not my story. It was there all the time. I just happened to be the one who trotted back to earth with it.

23 *You're very interested in religion.*

Oh yes.

Not in a proselytizing way, but in a questioning way, kids trying to deal with religion.

I can't imagine writing much in my life without God making an appearance – often. Because, whatever you think God is – and obviously my image will be different than somebody else's – the Creator, for me, is an essential part of what's going on. So yes, religion and the us of the word God appears over and over in my books. And it's certainly not a conscious effort to promote religion. I just have this deep love of the world. And I personally think that the world has this force of goodness in it. And that force of goodness is what I call God. So when I write about a scarecrow standing in a garden, or whales coming up out of the sea, or dogs passing away into a spirit life, I can't imagine writing about those things without some reference to what I think is the God that created them. I just basically have this practical assumption that there's a Creator, and that the Creator is still around.

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24 *She decided to write her novel*, I Had Seen Castles *after she read some interviews with World War II veterans in the newspaper.*
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I realized that these were men who may have sold me insurance, may have put gas in my car, may have taken my quarter at the toll booth. I realized that these men were still walking around us and living in our neighborhoods. And we had no idea that the fellow mowing his grass was somebody who was once nineteen, watching his friends be blown apart in World War II. And I felt that I wanted to write something for these men. My own father had been in the tank division, and from what I understand from members of his family, he did see his best friend die beside him. And who knows how that might have contributed to my father's eventual death from too much drinking after her got out of the Army?

So I wanted to write a novel. And at first, I thought that it wouldn't be right because I had not lived it, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I finally decided that if I could simply imagine the feelings and emotions, then maybe it would be OK for me to try to write the novel. So for about six months, I read lots and lots of books on World War II, the books in which men talked about what it was really like, not the Hollywood version of being in the war.

And then when I was finished reading, I sat down and thought about a novel to follow a boy from the time he gets the "verve" to join the war and he's all excited, and follow him through until he comes out the other end of the war with what he has realized about it.

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26 I'm not always sure that I like being a writer. Some people would be astonished that writing hasn't made my life perfect, that all the published books and whatever successes came with those haven't completely fulfilled me. You know, there's still a part of me that wishes I had become a teacher, that wishes I was teaching high school in some small, country place and making a difference.

Writing is a really lonely, solitary, sometimes sad profession. Because truly, everybody else is out there doing something with other people, and they have people to have lunch with in the lunchroom, you know, hang out.

On the other hand, I have to look at the books and believe – because of the many doors that have been opened for me to become a writer, I became a writer easily. Once I sit down to write a book, the words come fairly easily. I've never really suffered as some artists do, to produce my particular kind of art. I have to believe that this is my purpose here. And I have to accept the dark side of it, as well as the side that gives me a sense that my life made a difference on the earth, and that I will have left something behind that was good. And hopefully lasting.

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27 When I first started writing, I used to go out on the road and do school visits and speak at conferences and found that I'm very shy. And it gets harder and harder for me to go out and meet a crowd of people. So I don't do that anymore. It actually sort of made me physically ill, even though it was a joy to see everybody's appreciation. What it did to my nerves was more than I can handle on a regular basis. So I stopped going out.

I think you can really give away all your spiritual energy really quickly if you're not careful with it, so I try to be careful with it and respect it.

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28 This is a book of poetry I wrote. The title of it is *Something Permanent*.

I had loved Walker Evans' work for many years because he had done a book with a writer who is one of my very favorite writers, named James Agee. And they traveled the South. Walker took photographs of the country people in the South, and James Agee wrote about them. And they actually lived in their houses and became entwined in their lives.

And I found out that Mr. Evans photographs were public domain, which means that anyone may publish them, because he did them as part of a government project. As government property, they were available to all the public. So I chose some of his public domain pictures and I wrote poems in response to the images that I saw.

Did you sit and stare at the picture?

Yes, and I didn't have to sit long. I wrote this book in probably a day and a half. There must have been 200 pictures in that book that I looked at. My eyes would scan the pages, and I would just stop at a photograph and look at it just for a few seconds, and I would write a poem immediately. I didn't edit, and I didn't revise. It was just very spontaneous.

29 This is a picture of a pair of scuffed-up old boots, old men's shoes. And the title of this poem is "Shoes."

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When he finally died, they kept them around the house for the longest time, tripping on them, arranging them beneath the beds, occasionally borrowing them in bad weather. Then a preacher
told them it was a sacrilege to the dead, moving his shoes around like a couple of mop buckets.
So they let them out at the cemetery one day. And of course, the shoes promptly disappeared. It was impossible for them after that to keep from looking down at the feet of every person who crossed their path. And this would have gone on probably forever, had not one of his hats turned up, way in the back of the closet.
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30 And this is a photograph of an old filling station with a few young men sitting in front of it. And the title of the poem is "Filling Station."
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Everybody wanted that job. And when Ferrell Brown's son got it, when Mr. Brown's son got to pump gas and flirt with pretty girls all day long, they all said it was a crock – that that boy never worked a day in his life, never had to with his rich daddy. So how come he got a job that plenty of other decent boys with real need wanted? Then word got around about the boy's mother and how she was walking through that house stark naked and trying to hang dinner plates on the clothesline. And people shut up about the Brown boy. Real need is a personal thing, they said. And his mother's a loon.
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34 *A lot of people listening to this program might be thinking, "I'd really like to write something. I have something to say." Do you have some advice for them?*

What I find often is that people who do feel a pull to write will sometimes distract themselves with reading all the books about what's trendy, what's being bought in New York, or they will go to all the conferences to figure out some way to plug in some trick, some magic key. And as they're busy doing this, they sometimes simply forget to sit at home and read fine writing.

Because I do think it's like preachers who learn to preach from other preachers. There's a certain cadence. There's a certain rhythm. There's a certain buildup to those "Hallelujahs" that get those people to flock down the aisles of a church. And any young man or woman who is raised in that environment has an innate sense of how that works. And so for me, because the genre that I was most attracted to was children's books, I read tons of them. And I tried to read the very best. When I found the very best, I made sure I had a copy of my own, and I would re-read it and re-read it until I had that sense, that innate sense.

The other thing is, it's really just the cost of a postage stamp. You still, even in this world of conglomerates and corporations and so forth, you can still be published by sending in something in the mail. It costs only the price of postage to put it in the mail and see to what happens, and to do that over and over and over again as you are expressing yourself on paper.

You know, when children ask me how to become better writers, I always tell them to go out and play. Sometimes, you just miss way too much sitting at a table with a blank sheet of paper in front of you. It's really important to just live life and wait for inspiration and write when your heart or your humor moves you to.
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Keith Maillard

This material comes from wide-ranging interviews with Keith Maillard, a master of weaving fictional characters into historical situations, after much research. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Keith Maillard.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material. Passages from Keith's writing are included in blue, when needed for context.

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1 Language is dirty. It's been in other people's mouths. Every word does not just sit there in isolation. It is interacting with the words around it. It takes on different connotations and different shades of meaning, and language is constantly evolving in the way we speak it. It doesn't get nailed down by dictionaries. They sort of freeze it after the fact, but it's continually evolving all the time.

2 *Here's what reviewers like about his writing. From the Toronto Star: "... faithful recreation of history, delicate portrayal of character, and rousing narrative that never flags." From The Vancouver Sun: "In an earlier generation, perhaps only Thomas Wolfe mined the veins of American memory as deeply as Maillard has done in the Raysburg novels."*

What's Raysburg? Well, Keith Maillard created a fictional West Virginia city - Raysburg - and has set at least part of all his novels there. To what extent is Raysburg is modeled on Wheeling?

It's very like Wheeling, my half-mythical, half-real town. But I didn't want to call it Wheeling because I wanted some fictional space to move around and to invent things, which I think is owed me as a fiction writer, good heavens. And also, I didn't want people calling me up or writing me or sending me e-mails saying, "You said they got electricity in Wheeling in 1898. And it was really1893."

I try to get things historically accurate as I can. But I still want a fictional place.

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3 *In* Gloria*, his novel published in 2000, Keith Maillard tells the story from the point of view of a teenage girl whose parents intend for her to be a social set, country club woman. Gloria doesn't want to follow that script. Now, Keith Maillard clearly did not draw this scenario from his personal life experience.*

That's why God gave us research. So we could find ways to write novels after we had exhausted all of our inner personal stuff, that you use up in the first book or two.

I did just massive, massive amounts of research, doing this. I read *Ladies Home Journal* and *Ladies Home Companion* and *Vogue* and *Seventeen* and I read "How to Be a Girl" books from the fifties and home ec texts and all this stuff.

He read books on twirling, had internet conversations with former twirlers and sorority girls, and a conversation with a woman from Tennessee about crinolines. Read a social graces book, makeup books…

… *How to Win a Beauty Contest*. OK. This is a wonderful book by Miss America of the time, published in 1960, *How to Win a Beauty Contest*. The chapter I liked best was, "How to Walk Pretty." And the instructions for walking pretty are so complicated that I cannot imagine anybody doing it.

The book suggests that you draw a line on the floor or pick a line on the floor and walk in such a way that your feet fall on that line. (laughs) And it goes on and on and on. There are instructions on, you know, if you're coming down the stairs, be sure when you grab your skirt to lift it up, to reach in deep enough to get all your petticoats. It's amazing to think of people actually reading that and doing it, or trying to do it.

You drew such a picture of women's lives in the '50s that your reviewers who are women said things like, "I was not eager to be thrust back into that particular world gone by, of crinolines and nylons, drum majorettes and home economics classes. Above all, the appalling cookie-cutter destinies, preordained for women. But I found myself riveted from first page to last."

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4 *So let's hear this guy put himself in the mind of a teenage girl putting on makeup. From* Gloria.

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The martini was wearing off, but she still felt a curious Alice-in-Wonderland disorientation, as though when she turned away from the mirror, she'd find herself not in her bedroom in Raysburg, but somewhere else, somewhere totally unforeseen.

She separated her dried lashes and gave them each a quick, hard squeeze with the curler, then a final, tiny flick of mascara at the tips. She'd met Roland at her first Delta Lambda White and Gold Invitational. He was - and she enjoyed describing him the way Hemingway would have - very tall and very brown. And when she'd caught him staring at her across the room, he'd walked directly over to her. "Hi," he'd said. "Are you as icy as you look?"

She'd been shocked. She'd thought only blondes could be icy. But she'd answered, "Oh yes, ten degrees below zero." Using a sable brush, Gloria did her first coat of lipstick. She always wore brilliant red. She had looked icy, she'd realized later, writing about it in her diary. And she decided that she liked looking icy. It went with being a Delta Lambda girl, and she would cultivate it.

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5 *So how did you write that book, being as how you're a man? (He laughs)*
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(laughs) It required input from about a million directions. One of them is, you know, in high school, I was always the girls' confidante. I really wanted to be their boyfriend, but somehow I always ended up being the one who heard all their sad tales, right? So I heard lots of sad tales. And there's something about me, I paid attention and remembered their sad tales (laughing). That was the beginning.

There's a wonderful bibliography called *The Adolescent in American Fiction from 1945 to 1960*. I went through that and picked out all the books that had a female adolescent protagonist, set in the Eastern United States in an urban setting. And I read all of those. I read everything I could find - which wasn't much - on twirling and on sororities and on things like that.

And then, every single word of this book passed under the eyes of my wife. Right? In every draft. And I would write something, and Mary would look at it and she'd say, "Well, it's pretty good, but what you've got going right there, that's just a male fantasy," she would say. "Get rid of that." And I would say, "OK." And if I didn't believe her, she would explain it to me. "Want me to tell you why that is a male fantasy?" (laughs)

I had two women editors at Harper Collins who were very helpful too, who also assisted me. And my poor wife got asked wonderful questions like, "How do you drive a car if your skirt is too tight?" Right? And she says, "Why, you slide your skirt up do you can move your legs. That's how you drive a car!" All kinds of things like that.

OK, I can imagine how you would know that women drew lines around their eyes. But how did you know that "You're hoping you'd get lucky and wouldn't mess up one of the lines?" How'd you know that?

Oh. I read lots of makeup books. My wife wears makeup. My older daughter wears so much makeup, you wouldn't believe it. You know, I'm not unfamiliar with women. Good heavens. I didn't write this living in a monastery.

Yeah, I can see you sitting there watching them put on the makeup, but it's the feeling about it. You just flashed me back about twenty years, when you're sitting there with that little brush, thinking, "Oh man, I gotta go to work. Hope I don't mess this up." You've thought about this a lot.

I have put makeup on my wife and daughter. And I have stood there and thought, "Gee, I hope I don't mess this up. I'll have to start all over again." (laughs)

Now, did you put makeup on your wife and daughter as research for this book? Or you just did it?

I did it because I'm better at it than they are. (both laugh)

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6 *Keith did have a tough time creating Gloria's roommate, Susie, a majorette.*
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Susie was hard. It took me a long time to get Susie. I have never known - I was about to say intimately, why not? - I have never intimately known a majorette (laugh), and I had to compile a really vast amount of stuff before I could begin to get her to come to life. And what you're looking for as a novelist is not just an accumulation of facts, you know, like building more and more facts. You're looking for things that will spark you, that will go FLASH!

When Elaine Pollack, the Canadian twirling champ, came to my office and we went out in the quadrangle outside my office, and she showed me the fifties twirls as they would have been done - and I really appreciated that - and then she handed me her baton. And I took it in my hand. And she said, "This is the ball and the tip, and this is the shaft, and you hold it right in the middle. And I held it right in the middle. And I said, "How do you twirl it?" And she showed me sort of the basic twirl, and I did it. And I thought, "Gee, that isn't so hard. I can do that." And that experience, you will find, literally, practically the way I've told it to you, right in the book. Because that's what happens to Susie when she's at the state fair and she sees the majorette and talks to her after the show's over.

Little things like that start to come together and add up to make a person.

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7 *And little things come together to make up a town too. His made-up city of Raysburg, West Virginia, a steel mill town. After you've read several of Keith's novels, you feel like you know the place.*

In his 1993 novel, Light in the Company of Women*, he reached back to the 1800s when Raysburg was new, the immigrants were pouring in, and the steel mills were iron mills.*

In this sample, young Jack Middleton, a photographer, has emigrated from Ireland. In the future, his descendants will be solid Raysburg citizens. But here, he's got his belongings in a wagon, rolling down The National Road, looking for a place to make himself a life.

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Jack had just attained his majority, by God, had just arrived in America, by God, and was full of himself, and wanted to see what he could see. He had been on his way to Columbus, or who knows, maybe even St. Louis. Jack had bought a good old dray horse - named, in the predictably idiotic American manner, Betsy - bought her and the wagon with her from a drunken tinker in Baltimore, loaded up his cameras and equipment and headed west.

It was a hot day with a taste of rain in the air. Jack was alone on the road, as he had been for most of his journey. He drowsed with the leathers on his lap, as the scenes through which he passed continued to unfold themselves before his closed eyelids. Sylvan groves so dense that not a sun mote relieved the gloom. Vast prospects of mountain ridges folding back behind yet more mountain ridges. The valleys between, hazy with purple mists, as though of some mysterious fairyland, long stretches of the old, dusty pike, overgrown now with grass, upon which snakes lay about like so many ropes, sunning themselves and in so great a profusion, that Jack could not avoid running his wheels over them. Silent
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taverns long ago fallen into picturesque ruin. For yes, the heyday of the National Road was long past. And if expeditious transportation had been his primary concern, he should have ridden on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, as apparently everyone else was doing.
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After a while, Jack feels lonesome and wonders what he's doing and where he's going.

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For the first time, he genuinely saw the place where he was, saw it as clearly as if it were framed, upside down, on his ground glass. "It's very like Wicklow," he thought. "By God, it is. Put up some stone fences, and this could be the very place. County Wicklow." He slapped the leathers, called out, "Step along, girl! Move lively, my sweet." He did not yet know where he was going, but he was suddenly in a fierce hurry to get there.

Jack attained the summit of the hill and discovered a little shack which had once been a toll gate for the National Road. Directly in front of it, an ancient, white-bearded character was seated in a rough-hewn chair, smoking a pipe made from a corn cob. A few minutes of conversation were sufficient to establish the fact that this worthy had once collected the tolls. What remained mysterious to Jack, however, was why he was still there, years after his function had passed away. "Nice view," the old man said.

Since ascending the crest of the hill, Jack had perceived a distinctly unpleasant quality to the atmosphere. "I mean no offense by the question," Jack said, "but could you hazard an opinion as to the origin of the terrible smell hereabouts?"

"Smell of money," the man said. "From the mills."

"Indeed. And with what endeavor are these mills engaged?"

"Why, iron, son. Iron." Jack bid the old gentleman a good night. He proceeded only a few yards, and was suddenly staring down on the rooftops of a prosperous town. It was, he would discover, Raysburg, West Virginia. And then, as he followed the steep streets on down toward Main, as he passed the lamplighter busy at his work, the long-threatened rain struck. And following the line of least resistance, Jack found himself urged on toward a great, dark curve, out at the edge of things and below the city, where the gas lamps of the downtown were reflected, burning white and yellow against the rain and the slate-grey sky. And as his tired mare felt her way over the cobblestones, on down the hill, he found that the mysterious line of darkness, lights reflecting yet further back, vague and diffuse, like a scattering of weary jewels, was the great, uncoiling form, obscured by night, of the Ohio River.
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You are quite in love with the Ohio River, I would guess.

Oh, I am. I still dream about it. Every few months I dream about the river and the bridges. Mainly the suspension bridge that goes over to Wheeling Island. I've dreamed about that bridge a million times.

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9 *Keith Maillard grew up in Wheeling and went to Linsly Military Academy, where in the words of his poem, "We were strange boys for the 1950s, used to sit in back alleys drunk on bottles of Black Label beer and weep for the sadness of the world."*

They read poetry.

Poetry didn't have any limits. It was real. When we said poetry, we meant life itself.

Those lines are taken from his poetry book, Dementia Americana. *In another poem in that book, he remembers the exact minute he decided to become a writer.*

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Loony Steve Allen presided over the nights, saying Hello Vern, how's your fern? Yeah, he really was America's pie-in-the-face zen lunatic, the genuine article. With Dick, my best friend, I watched him on a snowy TV, and Dick's grandfather taught me an old song called Sabastopol, in open tuning on the guitar. And once at the piano, Dick sang hymns until his grandmother said that if he didn't stop, she'd fall on her knees and weep. And I held Axel's Castle open on my lap, the words transmuted into gold: "Each of your moments has a special tone," I read, or told myself, crazy with joy. "Invent a special language that is yours alone."

>>

How true is that?

Keith: That's absolutely dead true. That, to the best of my memory, is when I decided to be a writer, is sitting in Dick's apartment over in Martin's Ferry, reading *Axel's Castle* when I was about 14. And what really got to me was that somebody had taken what people wrote creatively so seriously that he would sit down and write this book about them, analyzing and thinking about what they had written. And by the time I finished *Axel's Castle*, I said, "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be a writer."

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10 From *Dementia Americana*:

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Let all times exist, each in its own perfection. We'll set him on the road again, the boy you were, without benefit of the full-grown man who remembers it as confusion, mess, and misery of tracking down some ancient hurt.

The cars pass in a whoosh of grey dawn haze. It's gone now, and red taillights blur in the mist. Toledo, Ohio. And every drop on every leaf, on every branch on this, God's tree, is sanctified. Don't say the words with irony, but softly and with care, as leaflets on the Boston common are strangely addressed to gentle children. He wants to be, she wants to be a messenger of love. Each in our own perfection then, we wander down these roads again. The girl you were, the boy you were, now scattered to the wind.

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11 *You play music. You've played old-time music, play jazz, early music. You were a bass player for Ferron, a very well-known singer, songwriter. And now you're trying to learn to play the four-string banjo. Do you see writing as music? What's the connection?*

Absolutely. I can tell in about ten seconds flat when I see student work if they're ear writers or eye writers. And it's hard to get eye writers to actually hear what they're doing. There is a prose rhythm in my mind that I hear all the time when I'm writing. And many times, I'll change a structure, not for the meaning, but for the sound of it.

This particular aspect of writing is very hard to teach anybody. But I want every paragraph to have a musical sense and come to a cadence.

I'm a newspaper writing coach and, after I've worked with people for a while, I can say to them, "You know, you can't sing that paragraph."

Yeah. I'd say exactly the same thing. That paragraph doesn't sing. That prose doesn't sing. And when you get kids that can do it instinctively, that's just a joy. Because they got that something in their ear, and you can see it on the page. I don't care what they're writing about. I know they're going somewhere when they've got that musical sense with language and with words.

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14 *Keith Maillard wrote Dementia Americana while the Gulf War was going on.*

I was very upset by the war. And the first night that it started and appeared on television, I had a dream. I mean, this sounds like something I made up, but I didn't. It's absolutely true. I had a dream. And in the dream, someone opened a book in front of me, like that, and said, "You will write a book of poetry about this war." And I woke up, and I thought, "Well, I could either say, "Ah, it was just a dream," or I can do it.

And so I started, started to write that sequence. And I wrote poetry every day when I got up, for several hours. And I didn't time it or plan it that way, but right when the war ended, so did the sequence.

(music throughout)

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.... Oh, America, I wanted to braid all your roads together into one great tapestry of the heart. I sat alone in the Howard Johnson's writing on a napkin, dazzling insights into the nature of God. This boy has forgotten where he's been. He can't tell violence from love. Hitchhiking in the cold rain of dawn, he thinks America is a girl he's forgotten in Canton, Ohio. Forgive me. It's a gift to be simple, but I don't know how.
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19 What's the old cliche? Sex, death, and love, you know, are really hard to write about. It's a part of life. I'm a realist writer. I try and get all of life in there, and that's part of it, and I try to do that too.

You can't just write a sex scene: Now I'm going to write a sex scene, and it sort of sits like an oasis in the middle – you don't do that. It has to fit into, you know, into your story and into what's going on. It has to be a part of it. Just like it is with us, you know. Real people!

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20 *He actually started writing* Alex Driving South *when he was still a teenager. Then he wrote more on it when he was at West Virginia University.*

I rewrote the opening of that 26 times. I thought everything had to be perfect, so I couldn't really go on and write anything until it was perfect.

He kept writing on it after college, out on the West Coast during the Vietnam War, as he got involved in the antiwar movement. He rewrote it 5 times, published another book first.

And I can remember when I got the first copy of it in the mail, I opened it up and sat at my desk, and I just wept. Because it had been all those years, I had been living with those two guys.

Those two guys: Evan, the one who left West Virginia, and Alex, the one who stayed. Every West Virginia writer that I've interviewed who doesn't live in West Virginia is in some way exploring their persistent attachment to this place. And they create characters that personify that dilemma. The one who left, the one who stayed.

That theme runs through a lot of literature. And coming back. Can you come home again? What happens if you try? Well, then you have to confront your past. What if you don't want to confront it? Which is what happens to Evan. But, of course, he does.

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21 *Could you have written about West Virginia if you'd continued to live here? That's a question that almost every writer from West Virginia thinks about.*

I don't think so. I'm not sure why, exactly, but I think there's a clarity and a distance that I have, living so far away. And also I have to work really hard to write about West Virginia. I have to think about it and re-create it in my mind. I have to do a lot of reading. And I actually have to intentionally make a trip back here to find things out. And it focuses me in a way that I don't think I would be if I were just living on Wheeling Island.

You can live that life that you didn't live by writing about it.

Well, writing fiction about anything is like that. It gives you a chance to live any life you wanted to live and couldn't. Right? It's wonderful. You can jump into other people's heads. And, you know, become them. And there you go.

And you're never bored. If you're stuck in the doctor's office, stuck in traffic, you can fiddle around with your character.

You know, that is absolutely true! When I'm writing, I'm continually writing in my mind all the time. I've sat in doctors' offices, you know, like for nearly an hour. Everybody else is fidgeting, and I'm working out a scene. Right? And my characters are walking around talking to each other. They're doing this and that, and sometimes I'll paw around and get a notebook or a piece of paper and make a few notes, so I don't forget. Yeah, it's true. You're never bored.

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23 It's amazing. Most people don't think that fiction writers make anything up. They think it all has to come directly from their experience, and everything is a roman clef. And of course, that's false. You make up lots of stuff.

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28 *A lot of people who are listening to these broadcasts either are writing or would like to write. And people wonder, "How do you do that?"*

It depends on who is asking me. If I was talking to high school kids, I would say, "Write whatever you want. Don't worry about your mother seeing it." (laughs) In fact, you don't have to show it to her. In fact, you don't have to show it to your teachers either. Um, keep it. Take it seriously. And at that particular stage of things, don't worry too much about all these formal things that they're trying to teach you in your English classes. You'll get that later.

And don't worry about being derivative either. This is a silly notion to worry about when you're fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. I can remember sitting in study hall writing endless imitations of Elliott's quartets. And it was a great thing to do. I loved every minute of it. And if somebody at the time had told me, "Well, this is just something you do as a kid," I would've been very hurt. Because I took it very seriously. And you should take your writing very seriously too. But the biggest thing about it is to keep on doing it, no matter who tells you not to.

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29 *Where do you write?*
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I have an office in my home. I have a little laptop computer that I've hooked up with an old black and white monitor and a keyboard, a really nice keyboard, actually. And uh, that's where I write, is in this little room.

I've talked to one person who says she writes best in a hammock. I found a particular booth at a Doughnut Shop that seems to work. You're in a little room with a laptop.

That's right. And of course, when you're really heavy into something, you're writing all the time, even when you're not writing. You're walking around writing. You're having dinner writing. You drive your kid to ballet class, and you're writing. Bring her back from ballet class, and you're writing. At its most intense, it's a process that practically takes over your whole life.

What do you do when you get ready to write?

OK, I don't have to worry about setting times to write. Because with teaching, a wife and two kids, I grab every second I can. Right? And I like writing. Now, revising or editing, I can do till the cows come home. I love it. I can sit there and move sentences around and put commas in and take them out and change words. That, to me, is fun. I'm weird that way.

30 What I hate is that blank computer screen. First drafting. Where you haven't got anything yet. You turn it on, and it's blank. To get ready to put something down on that computer screen, I either do something like walk around in circles in the yard, around and around and around and around. Or sometimes I lie down flat on my bed on my back and close my eyes and work through the scene. OK, that's the point at which my wife comes in and says, "What are you doing?"

And I say, "I'm writing." And she says, "Aw, come on." But I am. That's what I'm doing. Because I have to have something before I can put anything down. The more I can have before I actually hit the computer, the better. If I can have the whole scene blocked out or at least a big chunk of it, that's all to the good.

At night, after everybody's gone to bed but me, I'll sit in bed with a notebook and a pen, and then I'll jot down bits and pieces for what's going to happen the next day. Usually bits of dialogue or what we call in screenwriting the beats in a scene. The psychological back and forth, the ping-pong interactions in a scene, we call beats. So I'll sketch the beat outline of a scene or something like that. So when I get up in the morning, I have the notes from the night before.

31 *Every writer finds a way to more or less chase themselves around the block and get away from their left brain or whatever it is that's blocking the story from coming in.*

And also, every once in a while, there's a day when nothing works. And then, rather than banging my head against the wall, I go and do something else. But that doesn't happen very often.

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Jayne Anne Phillips

This material comes from wide-ranging interviews with Jayne Anne Phillips. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Jayne Anne Phillips.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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1 I was definitely always the one who talked about things she shouldn't talk about. I think it's really a prerequisite for a writer.

2 I think language has to take chances. Language has to talk about what we might not speak about, but we do think about.

I've always thought of the writer as the conscience of a culture. Not in the sense of "This is wrong, this is not wrong," but in terms of searching for meaning. And in maintaining that there IS meaning. I think writing is an act against randomness, against the idea that things simply happen, that there's no reason, there's no eye in the sky. There's nothing but us, sort of fumbling around. And I think that's not true. And I think the writer - or really any kind of artist - is presenting us with evidence that that's not true.

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8 *Jayne Anne says you can find a seed of a story anywhere: family history, a road sign, an overheard conversation. The important thing is, it affects you, for whatever reason.*

I think there has to be that gut connection. And it may have to do with a sight or a smell, an anonymous sight, the sight of someone doing something, and you have no idea who that person is. It may come from a remembered line that you heard spoken in childhood. It may come from a fantasy. But you have to start somewhere real.

And many times, you write what you never intended to write. The writing always has a kind of evolution that you can't plan and you can't limit. And that's what's so miraculous about it.

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10 *People don't always realize that this is the character's voice, not Jayne Anne's.*
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People are always so bent on asking you, “Well, I assume this happened to you.” or “How could this have happened to you?” Or “How could you have known about that?” People used to say to me, “How could you have written those stories? You don’t look like you could have written those stories.”

How do you respond to them when they say things like that?

I just kind of smile (laughs).

Jayne Anne often writes about children who know about things they don’t look like they should know: alcoholism, abuse, parents who chase each other with pitchforks. These children concern her, and so she’s often written their stories.

* * *

12 I do subscribe to the gestalt idea of personality in which, when we dream a dream, it’s not just one facet of the dream that represents us. Each facet of the dream is a part of us. And I feel very much that way about writing. That every voice I imagine is a facet of me and a facet of the reader who will then pick up that story or book and feel, hopefully, different parts of himself or herself inside it. That’s why, I think it was Gorky who said that, that writing should be deeply disturbing if it’s effective, sometimes in good ways, sometimes in ways that are threatening. But that a book should really act as a kind of a slow fire. You read it and think about it. And it doesn’t quite go away.

* * *

13 *If you’d been watching Jayne Anne while she wrote any of these stories, you wouldn’t have seen much movement. She doesn’t pace, doesn’t wring her hands. In fact, she compares writing to meditation or a religious practice in which you sit quietly in space and wait for your characters to show you what they’re going to do.*

I just sit there like a piece of stone. I often write by hand, in a notebook, writing lines. I mean, the computer makes revision much easier, but my process doesn’t seem to have been sped up much by it. I really require a lot of time to just sit and think. And I write very slowly.

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14 *There are many people in West Virginia and elsewhere who struggle to write and struggle to get past all the inhibitions. How do you find the courage to write as honestly as you do?*

I don’t think it has to do with courage. I think every writer writes because they must. It’s a means of survival. And I think so-called courage is simply a measure of how badly the writer needs to speak. And I think if there’s anything writers owe writing, it is the promise to go as far as you can, to go as deeply as you can, to do as much as you're able to do, with the help of the language.

Have there been times in your life when you were hungrier to do that than others?

Oh no. I have, I would say, an unquenchable hunger to do that. Although life doesn't always cooperate in allowing me the time and space.

And she literally means she HAS always been hungry to do that, to write, even when she was growing up in Buckhannon.

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15 I remember when I was in Girl Scouts writing a kind of serial novel to entertain my friends. We met in various churches around town. And I remember, at the Baptist Church, they had these beautiful mahogany cubicles like restaurant booths almost. But they were all enclosed by red velvet curtains.

They'd put various groups in these cubicles, and we'd draw the curtains, and I'd bring out my so-called novel, which I began with everyone in it. Myself and all my friends were in the novel. And then the heroine moves to New York City and falls in love with a gang member. And there are wars going on in the subway tunnels and all. But the interesting thing was that they kept wanting to hear it, even after they'd been written out. And that was my first sense of writing something that people were interested in. And that they could be represented by things other than themselves.

Before the serial novel, she read and read and read.

16 My friends used to complain because they'd come out to see me or to play with me, you know when I was a kid under twelve, and I would be sitting on my bed reading. And I remember my girlfriends getting mad at me because they couldn't get me to put the book down, even though they were standing there. So I was a kind of book junkie. I wasn't always reading great literature, by any means, but I was constantly reading. And as time went on, I read better and better work. I think, by the time I began writing, I had, really by osmosis, I had soaked up different ways to work with words. And I think I used language as an escape. I used books as an escape. I knew I could go anywhere inside someone else's language. And I could know a lot more than I was supposed to know at my age. Nobody could keep me from learning what was in books.

17 *From a Newsday review: "Phillips work is deeply personal, but never simplistically autobiographical."*
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Well, the broad outlines are sort of autobiographical. But they're the details that have happened to everybody. Parents, parents' illnesses, birth of children, running away, coming home. What happens when you come home. What home is. I think that's one of the basic questions in my work: What's home? What's identity? How do we find out what they are? Sometimes we find out what they are in their absence.

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20 *In the front of Jayne Anne's second book of short stories, Fast Lanes, there's a long list of her awards and honors, including an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Before any of the honors are mentioned, it says "Jayne Anne Phillips was born and raised in West Virginia."*

Well, it's a lot more important. And it came way before any award. I think my work is really rooted in my childhood, my young adulthood, my family, my ancestry. And it's very much rooted in place. I've sometimes written about places very far away from West Virginia, and people who certainly have maybe never seen the place where I grew up. But the sense of hard reality, the edge in my work, I think, comes from having grown up there.

21 I think no matter where I had grown up, I would have followed the same kind of path. There's almost a sense that I don't have the right to write about where I came from until I've gone away and found out who I was, apart from that place. And then I need to find my way back to it, thought language. And it's part of the intensity of need to write is that need to go home, not physically, but spiritually.

She says her "need to go home" helps her as a writer.

Jayne Anne: Space and distance make you very aware of what you lose in going away to work. And that loss sharpens everything that you have to say and everything that you think about. There's just no substitute for growing up in West Virginia.

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22 *The daughter in her story, "Home," has an erotic dream.*

I think if I'm going to take the reader deeper and penetrate inside what our everyday lives really mean to our unconscious selves, to what we do, to what we dream, when we fantasize or remember, the prose has to start at a kind of communal reality. And then move into the superconscious, the unconscious, to all the things that literature can say that we can't.

And in that story, we have a conversation between the daughter and the mother, and then the daughter is reading Reader's Digest, then she goes to sleep and she has a dream. So you have reality, something that's read, then something that comes to you from the unconscious mind.

There is constantly this tug, the tug of the unreal on the real. But the unreal is no less true than the real. And I have always felt that language can get at that, because it can hold past, present, and future, in one sentence, on one page, and let us see it whole, in a way that we never do in real life.

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24 *Sex runs through Jayne Anne's stories like an underground river that suddenly flows into plain sight and washes over everything, just like it does in real life. And, really, most things in Jayne Anne Phillips' writing have many layers. There's so much below the surface.*

Jayne Anne: I remember when I was a young kid, I had a recurring dream that the hill right behind our house - which was beautiful and covered with dogwood trees in the spring - was turning into a volcano and nobody knew it but me. Smoke was coming off it.

The volcano never erupted in the dream. But it was as though I knew something, and I had to tell what it was, but no one was ready to hear it. And I think that, that's where the writer always is. And the resistance that we move through in writing is really our own resistance. It's not so much that other people don't want to hear what we have to say. It's that it's so hard, inside the self, to get at what's most important to us - and what might be most threatening to us.

Five generations before Jayne Anne dreamed that volcano, her father's family was working a mountain farm in Randolph County, about twenty miles from her childhood home.

25 My father's family, the Phillips's, had a farm near Coalton, a farm that was actually a land grant from King George. Like 300 years before, it was a huge tract of land. It was broken up among the descendants of the family, little by little, until in his generation, it was pretty much gone.

That farm became a major seed in her writing.

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28 *As you write, who are you aiming your stories at?*

The God within (laughing). I really feel as though it's the writer's responsibility not to think about the reader. Not to think about who's looking at this. Not to think about whether to have permission. I think writing is always, in a sense, an act of risk and an act of transgression. Because there's always a pressure on us not to speak. There's always a pressure on us not to know. That old phrase "ignorance is bliss" came out of somewhere. But I don't think ignorance is bliss. I feel as though bliss is the possibility of gaining access to something larger than the personality, to something more than we can know as individuals. And that's what language is, and that's what writing is.
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I see the books as being all connected. I see them all coming at the same thing in a lot of different ways, through a lot of different characters and a lot of different guises of language. But it's as though that spiritual progress or spiritual seeking has to be grounded in extremely physical language. And sometimes it's very sexual language. Sometimes it's very lyrical language that has to do with land, with smells, with weather. With the feel of things.

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36 *(following a conversation about* Motherkind*, her book about childbirth) Once again, you're writing about subjects that a certain percent of the population would just assume people didn't talk about.*

(laughing) That's why they're so important. That's why there has to be language that talks about them, studied language. Language that is meant not only as information, but as art.

A lot of mothers would like to ask you: How do you write and be a mother too?

Well, you just don't write that much. (laughs) You know, you don't write that much. So what you do write had better count.

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Sandra Belton

This material comes from am extensive interview with Sandra Belton. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Sandra Belton.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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1 As a writer, I basically have two goals. One is to write what I know. And what I know is growing up in America as an African-American of middle-class socioeconomic orientation. My second goal is to write, with a loving eye, on all children. No matter what the story that has to be told, or the issue that has to be dealt with, it can be dealt with within the spectrum of love, that understanding of the reality of the human condition, and a basic knowledge that we are all human. And in that, we share something together. We just absolutely do. And I would hope that my books, what I write, can wrap their arms around all children.

2 All my stories are born in truth and fact of my life, or spring from there into the imagination. Either how it could have been, would have been, should have been, or glad it wasn't (laughs). I'm not sure which. But, for me, that's really important. I can't begin to write about it unless I have some clue as to what it was like.

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3 *When Sandra Belton was a girl in Beckley, West Virginia, in the 1950s and 40s, she couldn't find any books in the library about kids who looked like her. All the storybooks were about white kids.*

Imagine a society then, imagine these library shelves in which you don't see picture books that have little black girls and little black boys running around, little babies being held up.

Now she writes those books. And anyone looking for the roots of Sandra Belton, the writer, could start at the Beckley library in the early 1950s.

The library was one of the places in our community that wasn't like the movie theater, where we had to go in the same door, but we had to sit upstairs. Wasn't like this park, where we couldn't go in at all. We could pass by and look through the gates at the white kids falling in the pools and so forth. It wasn't like that school only a half a block away from where I lived, that the bus carried the white kids to, where we couldn't go. We had to walk several blocks away to our school.

The library was open to us. Same rules, same guidelines for black kids as white kids. So that was one of the places that we especially liked to go. Plus, the library had shelves of magic that you could browse through and pick something magical to take home with you for a whole week.

It was a place where we could be free and just like everybody else. So we packed that library usually on Saturday and combed those shelves. But there was one thing that was missing, even there. And that was stories about kids. And I was desperate to find stories about kids that were like me, like us. That talked like we did, that looked like we did. The nuances of language, the music, the movements, the way the bodies were in motion. Those things that were uniquely like us, African Americans. Those were the books that were missing in those days.

There was history of course. Every now and then, history about black people. But those special books were missing.

These weren't books that we asked for specifically by definition, like, "Where are the books about the black kids?" This isn't something we did. And maybe we didn't know how to put it in those terms. But we knew they were missing. And I knew they were missing with every *Bobbsey Twins* volume that I read. I loved those stories, but there was something about them that didn't ring true to me.

And the more of those kinds of stories that I wanted to read, the more I did read fairy tales. Because, to me, the fairy tales were without certain descriptions and without certain pictures that limited my ability to imagine.

You could imagine a black princess…

I could imagine a black princess. Now, Rapunzel was tough because Rapunzel's hair was golden, and that pretty much was not in our community. And Rapunzel was so outrageous. Somebody climbing on your hair? Boy, your scalp would have been killing you! And I think I knew that, even then. But the princesses were black in my mind. And the Princess on a Pea? Whoa, she was major black! (laughs) Because I could just see that, all those mattresses and that body so well-attuned to pain, and to comfort, that she could imagine that little lumpy pea. That girl was black. I knew it!

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4 *I think that's what most of us want. Books, like everything else, to reflect us.*

I think that many people can understand it from the point of the roles of women. The way women were portrayed. When you saw a woman, she wasn't in a room with people making decisions about a business. She was in the kitchen with an apron on. This is unfair. And it wasn't great for black kids to not see themselves.

I don't think it was good for the white kids either. I was a little kid growing up 15 miles away from you. And you know, I should have been learning that people of all colors are a normal part of the world. And I didn't see it in books. I didn't see it on TV.

You're absolutely right. It's necessary for a healthy world, to have reflections of a world that embraces everybody everywhere, in all kinds of roles. This is an affirmation of the equality of people.

5 And now Sandra Belton is writing the books she wishes she could have found at that library. Her *Ernestine and Amanda* series, for instance, stars two talented girls - rivals and sort-of friends - who squabble, dream, worry about being fat, cope with parents who get divorced, the kind of things that any kid might face. These two kids happen to be African American.

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10 *The Ernestine and Amanda series includes books with names like Ernestine and Amanda: Mysteries on Monroe Street, and Ernestine and Amanda, Members of the C.L.U.B. Sandra Belton figures she'll take these two into their late teens.*

As she tells their stories, she mentions historical events and figures in African American history. And at the end of each Ernestine and Amanda book, there is a kid-type scrapbook that tells a little about each historical figure, place or event mentioned in that book. For instance, the scrapbook at the end of the book with the dance scene includes pictures of Katherine Dunham, the great African American dancer, a lead sheet for the spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," a picture from a segregated school, and pictures from the Civil Rights movement, with notes to make kids think, like "Can you imagine being taken to and from school by soldiers?"

11 *Why is it important for young people to know about what came before them, their heroes in history?*

The more kids know about what was, the more they can affect what will be. And in the case of black kids - and this phrase, or some variation of it, appears in every *Ernestine and Amanda* book - you don't know where you're going until you know where you have been. I so believe in that. And I especially believe in it for black people in America whose history is not as well-known as it should be.

Real people and events in African American history are part of Ernestine and Amanda because they were part of my life, our lives. We went to schools named after black people. There was W.E.B. DuBois High School in Mount Hope, West Virginia. We had as a part of every Friday afternoon, black history. It wasn't black history then, it was called Negro history. And the thickest book we had was our Negro history book. A green book with gold lettering, "Negro History," right on the cover.
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We knew about the black community from which we came. We knew about it from that - I think it was an hour and a half - every Friday afternoon in seventh and eighth grade. We knew about it because of the discussions that went around our dinner tables. They were mentions in the church services. They were the discussions that took place in the drug store. We know it today because it is so available in other places as well. But then we knew it because it was deliberately discussed, deliberately told.

And today, she loves to meet young African American fans who see themselves mirrored in the books she writes.

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12 … And she introduced her to me and said, "Here's your favorite author." And in that moment of introduction, I was looking in the child's face, and I saw that most wonderful spark of total delight that you can only see in someone's eyes at the very second it is being experienced. And I was thrilled beyond measure. And had every wonderful thing wrapped in a glimpse that I would want as an author.

It was something that took me through time, and I saw what I would have loved to have felt in my heart as a reader, by reading a book about me at that time. And I said, "Well, lookahere. Look at the blessing you just got."

So you're not only doing things for kids now. You're doing something for yourself, as a kid.

Oh heavens, yes.

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13 I didn't have a special place. It was always there. It was with me all the time, and it could come out whenever I needed it. When I was sitting in church, squeezed in between some adults who were making me be still, it could come in and take me away. In school, when I thought I could never bear another sound of that droning voice that wouldn't let us DO something, but just sit there, it saved me from getting in trouble. When I was a teenager watching the boy I thought was just, ooo, so cool, make eyes at the girl that I hated, it transported me to someplace where I was the center of attention. So that special dreaming place has always been in my head. And it could come out anywhere, any time.

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21 *Sandra Belton's novel for young people, McKendree, published in the year 2000, is set in West Virginia.*

West Virginia gives you something rich in your spirit. It gives you something deep to draw from. I cannot imagine having grown up in a more spiritual place, actually. Something about the mountains.
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There's a gentleness, there's a calmness. Maybe it's a realization of being there among things that are so clearly defined by things greater than human beings.

When I was writing *McKendree*, I actually had pictures of West Virginia surrounding my computer. I had a huge picture of the New River Park that was in front of my computer.

22 Sandra's father was a doctor who made house calls in the black community. He also had white patients who came to his house. And he was the doctor for McKendree, an old folks home for black people on the banks of the New River in Fayette County, West Virginia. Sandra set a large part of her book there.

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24 And in *McKendree*, Sandra Belton explored a delicate issue.

I hoped to bring to light in *McKendree* how the color issue in the black community has been, and still is I think to some degree, a crippling thing. How buying the idea that lighter is better is sort of related to a greater theme in society of how a physical attribute gives you more success than another physical attribute.

Simply stated in *McKendree*, in the time recaptured there of 1948, a light-skinned black person, given that condition alone, often had more success than a person darker. The lighter-skinned kid might be the one picked to greet the principal for the class, might be the one picked to play the part of the princess, as opposed to the handmaiden. This is a reality.

Was it like that when you were a kid?

Yes, it was like that. I think to some degree, we have some residuals of that. Nor is that a condition that is unique to the black community. Think about the girls who were ironing their hair in the sixties to make it long and straight. Or the girls who became blondes. Because, the blondes, don't they have more fun?

In McKendree, a bunch of African America teenagers volunteer at McKendree, the old folks home. Some are dark-skinned, some light. The question of skin color comes up in their romances and in their conversations with the old people at McKendree.
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25 Writing about skin color within the African community has been referred to as airing dirty laundry I think, to some degree. But it is important to write about things that are issues and that are problems and that are hurts. A world free of problems would be a world, I think, without a lot of books (laughs). But much of our humanness, we get in touch with much of our humanness, I think, through the things that we read and the things that we look at and certainly the things that we hear…

Maybe the least thing that it can do is say "You are not alone." I don't know about helping you through it, but knowing that you're not alone is the beginning of something.

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26 *I've heard some writers say that, when it's going well, you aren't exactly in control.*

Absolutely. When I'm in control, it's less powerful. When I release control, the writing is much better. It's very clear. Even I can see that. One of the best examples I have had, to date, has been what happened when I was working on the first *Ernestine and Amanda* book. I work with an outline, so I knew I was at the place where Amanda finds out that her parents are about to get separated. And I really was trying to think OK, what is Amanda feeling now? And I was twirling around in my chair trying to figure it out. And suddenly I turned around to the computer and my hands typed a word. Mawyn. M-a-w-y-n. I looked at it. And then it came to me what it was. *[*

"Mawyn" was the name Amanda had called her sister Madelyn when she was little. And Madelyn was going to tell her their parents were separated. As soon as Sandra got that little clue, she began writing rapidly.

Soon as I started writing, it started coming. I felt these chills in my body, I realized they were like tiny, freezing feet.

You felt them while you were writing?

I felt the tiny freezing feet, and I knew that's what Amanda was feeling, and this is how Amanda described it. I really could feel it.

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27 I got a letter from a child, a little boy who said, "You write pretty good." He liked the story. And he said that that part where I was telling how Amanda felt when she heard that her parents were getting a separation was REALLY good. And he knew, because that's how he felt when it happened to him. And I want you to know, it doesn't get any better than that, the word from a kid.

28 I had been putting off writing the next *Ernestine and Amanda* book for quite some time, because I always knew that book was going to be an important turning place, and it was going to deal with death. More serious than some of the other books, although lost jobs and separation and divorce are very serious issues which children face. But death on their level is really, really tough.

I am ready now, I think, to write this book. And it's going to help me, in many ways, sort through a very devastating period in my own life, because of a loss.

The death of somebody very close to her.

So I am looking forward and dreading the writing of this book at the same time. I think I now bring an understanding that I never had before, not even close to. I will know something that I didn't know several months ago that will definitely inform the telling of this story. And if I'm true to this, I will write something in turn that will offer something very powerful to my readers.

I had been putting off writing the next Ernestine and Amanda book for quite some time, because I always knew that book was going to be an important turning place, and it was going to deal with death, more serious than some of the other books, although lost jobs and separation and divorce are very serious issues which children face. But death on their level is really, really tough. I am ready now to write this book. And it's going to help me, in many ways, sort through a very devastating period in my own life, because of a loss.

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29 *You know, your books are something like front porches. In your childhood, people sat around on front porches, and the older people passed down to the younger people what they knew. You're doing that with your books.*

I think that's a wonderful thing. Front porches that I remember were safe, wonderful and loving places. And that would be what I hoped to do... I like that analogy.
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Pinckney Benedict

This material comes from an extensive interview with Pinckney Benedict. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Pinckney Benedict.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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4 *He writes to music: rockabilly, early raw country, Pink Floyd, to get himself into that zone where the stories play through his mind.*

I listen to music as I write. I know a lot of people can't do that, but I do. And music is a very powerful, sort of inducement to me, for writing, for that waking dream state.

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9 *You've got a lot of characters who act without thinking about the consequences. Act out of their heart, act out of anger. One thing or another.*

Generally speaking, they are people who fulfill some aspect of me that I don't possess, but would like to. They have some bravery about them that I don't have. Or, or, if they are reckless, they're reckless in a way that I kind of admire, because I tend to be very careful. I tend to look before I leap and be very cautious and try to always have a plan. And so forth.

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14 *(In the story, "The Sutton Pie Safe," a rich woman insults a farm family when she drives up and tells them she wants to buy a piece of their furniture. The father is furious. He has been about to make a snakeskin belt for his son. Instead, he slices the snakeskin up.)*

I wrote this story for a workshop in college. And at the end of the story, the son and the father actually go to make the belt. Joyce Carol Oates, who was my teacher, read the story . And she said, "No, no, no, this story ends wrong." She said, "Of course, we want the father and son to make the belt together. But you have to deny us our satisfaction in that. Because that's not what the father would do. The way he's just been affronted, he's going to be angry, and with no way to take it out on the mother, he's going to direct it toward the wrong person."

So Pinckney rewrote the ending. And the way it ends now, the father and his son go out in the yard to skin the snake. And then Mrs. Hanson bounces by with a smile on her face. As she drives away, the
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dad, already angry, finds fault with his son, and then deliberately cuts up the snakeskin so his son can't have the belt. And the reader thinks, "Oh no!"

And that was a great lesson in what stories are, that they aren't necessarily satisfactions. That often, stories work best when they deny us our expected or hoped-for satisfactions and give us some other experience instead of that.

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16 *Some reviews have criticized Benedict for writing about uneducated and sometimes unprincipled people. Benedict responds.*

Robertson Davies is a writer I admire a lot, a Canadian writer, a really great novelist and essayist. And he saw the role of the writer as moralist: not to moralize or proselytize or set out any moral standard. But the writer as moralist was really obligated to observe carefully and truthfully and to record what the writer observed. That's sort of the highest calling I can imagine for myself, is just to observe truthfully and try not to lie about things and try not to shape things toward my own ideology or someone else's ideology or my own preference or what have you.

That said, of course, I'm making stuff up and writing fiction. But I'm just trying to observe with as clear an eye as I possibly can.

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18 *Any reviewer who talks about your work mentions the amount of violence in it. You're drawn to it in some way.*

I'm fascinated by it. Because it is, um, it's strangely, it's something that we as human beings are really, really good at. And it's also something that we say universally we deplore, at the same time as almost universally engaging in it. Here we are in this enlightened twenty-first century, and at the same time, there is a level of violence in the world now that is at least as prevalent as it was in the Dark Ages.

Your stories are the opposite of these little novels of manners.

The one thing I try not to do in my fiction is over-intellectualize. I mean, I do it a lot in my own life. I'm sitting around in a room just sort of thinking myself into a big hole, you know. But my characters don't do that. And they do have recourse to their bodies, a lot. Again, it's something I admire very much. They exist in their bodies rather than solely in their heads.

… In some way, my stories are where my id actually gets to have its play, where I get to do that thing I would do if I weren't so concerned with, with having a nice job and so on and so forth. That's where that part of me just gets to be what it actually is rather than what I manage to tamp it down and make it look like being civilized.

19 I think folks are sometimes surprised to meet me and find out that I'm just a kind of mild-mannered college professor.

Well, you are very mild-mannered looking. You look downright pleasant.

(laughs) I mean, I try to be. And one of the reasons that I can be is that I have this place where I can use my less sophisticated and less socially acceptable self in a socially acceptable way.

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21 *Do you write about things that frighten you?*

That's always the first advice I give to my students. Write to your fears. Pick out the thing that scares you the worst, and then go as straight as you can to the heart of it. Because there's real energy in that.

22 A friend of mine and I call a lot of contemporary fiction, uh, we call it living room fiction. Because it all takes place in somebody's living room. And it is, it's just folks sitting around contemplating and I find that deadly dull. I mean, I love plot! And I guess maybe that's an embarrassing thing to admit nowadays. But the fiction I read, all of it is generally speaking, heavily plotted. Stuff happens. People fall in love. And there's sex, and there's death, and there's violence. And you know, I love that. I love it when things happen.

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27 *Like most writers, Pinckney composes as much with his right brain as he does with his left.*

I feel very much not in control of my work when it's going well. When I AM in control, then I know I've done something wrong. Or that I'm putting my foot down too heavily on what I'm trying to accomplish.

I think the average person has a hard time imagining not being in control of what you're writing. You know, we're thinking, "Now what shall I write next?"

And that's how it always starts. Now, I'm going to do a story about X. Then if you've got it right, and if you set it up right, and if you're imagining the world in which the story takes place richly enough and powerfully enough, then that world and those characters have their own demands. You say, "Oh, I want to write a story about betrayal." And really what they want to do is a story about fileal love. Or something like that. And your demands have to be secondary to their demands.

How do you know what they want to do?

It has a lot to do with dreaming. Everybody's a really good storyteller, at least when they're asleep. Because your dreams are you. Right? You generate your dreams. They come out of things you know. You recognize people in them. You recognize places in them.

And you do have some kind of control of them, in that, without you, they don't exist. And they're utterly convincing, in the way you want a story to be. I mean, when you're in them, you believe them absolutely. And they terrify you. Or delight you. I mean, you can laugh in your dreams. You can scream. You can cry. You can have sexual adventures. And at the same time, the dream is using the material of your brain in some way to shape itself.

You don't know what's going to happen, but it's you that's doing it.

Exactly. If you've ever had a dream where you're told a joke or someone has told you a joke. And when you hear the punch line, you laugh, because it's a surprise to you. But then you wake up, and you think: How could it have been a surprise? I told myself that joke. I mean, there's no one in there but me.

Well, that's very much what writing is like for me when it's going well, is that there is this fully-realized world that is utterly convincing to me, that I recognize parts of, although they're often recombined. You know, there'll be some of my grandmother's house joined to some of my parents' house, joined to some of my own house. Just like in dreams.

And the characters are often people I recognize, although they shift and transmute and change and take on different aspects in the course of the writing. And they'll surprise me. I mean, they'll say things - It really is like I'm dreaming them or they and I are participating in some common dream.

I feel very much not in control of my work when it's going well. When I *am* in control, then I know I've done something wrong. Or that I'm putting my foot down too heavily on what I'm trying to accomplish.

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29 My first day in a college creative writing class, my teacher, who was Joyce Carol Oates, when she heard I was from West Virginia, her first words to me were, "You have to go out and get the stories of Breece Pancake."
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And I did. And I had just started making forays into that same material myself. And to see here, this guy was really writing literature. I mean, it really was real literature. And at the same time, it wasn't the same kind of elevated, inaccessible voice. But it was the voice of people I grew up with. I mean, he uses so many real places: Sewell Mountain. Gauley Mountain. Chimney Corner, Ansted, Gauley Bridge, you know. I mean, these are all places that I know.

For me, it just took the top of my head off. And it said that I didn't have to pretend that I knew about France in the 1940s, that knowing about West Virginia in the sixties and the seventies was sufficient to make literature. And it changed the direction of my life utterly.

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32 *We'll read from one last Pinckney Benedict story, "Odom."*

It's my favorite story… I have stories like "The Sutton Pie Safe" that I'm extremely fond of, and I'm glad it's been anthologized a good bit. At the same time, I wish that I could take ten percent of that attention and put it on "Odom." Because "Odom" feels like a much more mature story to me.

I dunno, I mean I go back to that story frequently, just when I feel, OK, I'm a lousy writer and I can't do anything. Because it's a story that reassures me. Because it accomplished so much, I think, of what I want to accomplish. And it does, to my mind anyway, create a real and convincing imaginative world.

33 It seems to me that it's the job of art to reveal as beautiful those things that are not apparently beautiful.

That's kind of the heart of what you try to do in a lot of your work, isn't it?

That's exactly right. Things that we wouldn't normally want to look at, I like in my work, not only just to look at, but to look at long and hard. And to see if, by looking at them in an intense and loving way, we can realize about them things that have previously not been realized.
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Breece D'J Pancake

Pancake died without leaving any recorded interviews. The few direct quotes we have from him come from his letters to his family and, second-hand, from his students. So we can only extrapolate about his motivations, themes and thoughts about his writing.

Much of this material comes from an extensive interview with Tom Douglass, Pancake biographer, and other West Virginia writers, who seemed eager to talk about his work. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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1 I'm going to come back to West Virginia when this is over. There's something ancient and deeply rooted in my soul. I like to think I have left my ghost up one of these hollows, and I'll never really be able to leave for good until I find it. And I don't want to look for it, because I might find it and have to leave. *(from a letter to his family)*

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2 **"**He created a voice and created a fiction all by himself where there was none before." - Irene McKinney

"It was the voice of people I grew up with. I mean, he uses so many real places: Sewell Mountain, Gauley Mountain, Chimney Corner. For me, it just took the top of my head off. It said that knowing about West Virginia was sufficient to make literature." - Pinckney Benedict

"It would be a mistake to consider these stories merely regional, for they go far too deeply for that. By giving us the hollows of West Virginia, its farms and coal mines, barrooms, and motels, fighting grounds and hunting grounds and burial grounds, but, most significantly, by giving us its people in all of their tangled humanity, Pancake has achieved the truly universal." - Andre DuBus III

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3 "All his stories are about people under pressure, layers and layers of pressure, of inabilities, of impossibilities, of closing doors. He heaps them up on each character, just to see what they'll do next.

This layering of character that Pancake does is very similar to Shakespeare, or any artist who tries to make a character that's deeper than the surface. A character that shows not only a human heart, but a human psyche." - Tom Douglass
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7 “I think what Breece realized about the world he was living in was that the traditional moral choices or values no longer existed. Instead, it was replaced with a world of individual choice, where individuals went off “helter skelter”, here and there. I think Breece understood this as the destruction of a moral center that he was trying to rediscover in his art. In order to recover that moral center, he placed his characters in dilemmas that challenged the personal choices that they made. For him, personal choice DID matter. What you did in your tiniest private moments was very important, if not sacred.

He’d heap up things against his characters. Heap up things that got in their way, obstacles or boundaries they had somehow to get through, just to see what they would do, what choices they would make. Now what are you going to do? And sometimes his characters don’t behave very nicely. They behave very badly.” – Tom Douglass

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10 “All of Breece Pancake’s male characters have a very deep connection with the land, and when society itself fails them, they just turn away and walk away off into the woods. They go hunting. They observe the weather. They go kill a turtle for soup. They shoot a deer. This puts them back into primary relationship with the land. And I understand this turning away from the failures of the social world, back to something that’s natural.” - Irene McKinney

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11 I’ve taught Breece Pancake for several years. And as I went over and over those stories, I kept thinking about the central conflict in his life, which seems to me, not to be reductionist, but it is: Should I stay, or should I go? And this is something you find echoing all the way through WV literature and through the lives of people who are not writers.

The sense that you’re economically powerless and you’re culturally powerless creates a great conflict in us because we have a real love for our culture. And I feel that in Breece very, very strongly.” - Irene McKinney

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I think it represents a connection not only to a time, but to a place. And it’s a return to first things, the origins of things. That’s sort of what this trilobite represents to Breece: this sort of rootedness, this being connected to a place. – Tom Douglass
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18 "The only thing about writing first drafts is that it's just as much a drain as basic training. I've been at it since seven this morning, and at 2:30, I feel whipped. Seven pages. I know that doesn't sound like much, but I assure you I bleed with every word." *(from a letter to his family)*

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14 *People are always assuming that Breece Pancake is writing as Breece Pancake. That the thoughts of his characters are his thoughts.*

"I think if you read those stories that way, then you're going to lose the beauty and the art of that book because these voices, these characters, are not Breece Pancake. They are masks, personas that he created. Maybe, in form, they're directed by some internal conflicts that he had. But they're not one-to-one representations of the artist.

West Virginia was the subject for him. He recast the stories that were told to him. Recast the things that he observed in an artistic way. He was able to make that the stuff of art." - Tom Douglass

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16 **"**Pancake had that kind of empathy for the underdog, for the alienated, for the person on the outs. And he does it so well in his stories that, if you don't know anything about his personal life, you can't help but believe that he must have lived that way or he must have been that way, just because he's such a great artist at it.

He was able to imagine a character fully. His creative imagination was just so powerful." – Gordon Simmons

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18 "He was a night owl. He'd stay up real late at night. Maybe four or six hours later, he'd wake in the wee hours of the morning and maybe write some more. His work ethic was incredible. His fiction's very tight and very well-phrased. And that comes from writing over and over and over again. Some of these stories he wrote maybe twenty times, maybe ten handwritten drafts, then maybe as many typewritten drafts." – Tom Douglass

From one of his letters home:

“The only thing about writing first drafts is that it’s just as much a drain as basic training. I’ve been at it since seven this morning, and at 2:30, I feel whipped. Seven pages. I know that doesn’t sound like much, but I assure you I bleed with every word.” (Breece Pancake)

Pancake intensely admired Tom Kromer, a writer from Huntington, who wrote one book during the Depression in a lean, fast-paced style that Pancake consciously incorporated into his own writing.

“He told his students to ‘Look upon your stories as a fine wine, one aged and well-made, not as a cup of instant coffee. Rewriting is the key to refined fiction,’ and that’s what he learned at the University of Virginia.” - Tom Douglass

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19 Among his fellow students, he stood out because of his cowboy boots, his large US Army belt buckle, his blue jeans, and the hill twang in his voice. His friend and classmate Nancy Ramsey recalls, “He was so different from all those little mealy-mouthed graduate students. There was Breece coming down the hall with his cowboy boots clicking and stomping.”

According to Chuck Perdue, one of Breece’s teachers, Pancake was thought of as some sort of Appalachian primitive. Some were both attracted and repelled by that perception, and he helped it along. Once, he told a group of graduate students about how he had stopped along the highway to pick up a freshly killed rabbit and took it home and skinned it out and cooked it. They were rather negatively impressed and talked about it with considerable disgust. And he added, “and Breece enjoyed their reaction.”

20 I think that he was alienated in a way that is not negative. Alienation is a way of preserving the self. And I think he tried to do that above all else, preserve his own identity, his own voice.” – Tom Douglass

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23 “But it’s always there.” ‘It’ is a predicament that he’s describing. It’s a predicament that he puts his character in that’s not so dissimilar to the life any of us might face when you think that there’s no future, and the past suddenly has no meaning for us. These are moments in our lives that we all have, not just in the life of Breece Pancake or the lives of some of his characters. A lot of people read that story as strictly autobiographical, that he’s trying to work through some of the difficulties that he had in his life, the psychological prisons he was trying to work out of. But I think it also talks about the predicament that he saw that we all share.” – Tom Douglass

23 What do you think Breece Pancake would tell people who want to write today?

"I think Breece would tell people from this state, from the region, that you can have a creative life. That you can express yourself as an artist and become a writer, not just recognized in your own state, but recognized in the whole country and around the world. I think he saw that the ordinary things in West Virginia are worth writing about. I think that's what Breece showed people. I think he showed would-be writers that the things around them are worth writing about. And that's what he's saying: that this place, this culture, though it's derided through stereotype, has something vital to say to the rest of the country: not maybe in the particular detail that he uses, but in the essence of these stories that have to do with a certain longing for beauty. A longing for love. A longing for redemption that we all have." – Tom Douglass

Stephen Coonts

This material comes from an extensive interview with Stephen Coonts at his Pocahontas County farm. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Stephen Coonts.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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1 Well, I'm a storyteller, a professional liar and a commercial writer. I don't really do literary fiction. The idea is to write books and sell them. Create entertainment for the reading public.

3 Little Steve Coonts read a lot of books. I liked books a lot and read everything I could get my hands on. Won a prize in the fourth grade for reading all 278 books in the fourth grade library. I just was an omnivorous, voracious reader. And you think you have to be if you ultimately are going to write. When people ask me, or tell me they have writing ambitions. I always ask them: Well, what do you read? If you're not a reader. You're never going to be a writer.

7 I started in '73 after the war, when I was a flight instructor. And I'd fly airplanes during the day, then come home at night and try to write about what it was like. My problem was, I didn't have a plot, and I didn't have the craft. But I pounded away for about ten years, wore out a couple of typewriters, and had reams of drivel. But I did learn how to write flying scenes.

6 *And Steve Coonts ...flew an A6 fighter plane from the deck of an aircraft carrier in Vietnam.*

The A6 Intruder aircraft was the Navy's all-weather attack aircraft: carrier based, crew of two, a pilot and a bombadier. I was a pilot.

After he got out of the service….

Drove a cab in Denver for a couple of months. Was a police officer in Longmont, Colorado for a couple of months. And then got into law school at the University of Colorado. Entered in September of 77. Went through in two and a half years. Graduated in September of 79 with a law degree.

7 *When did you start writing?*

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didn’t have the craft. But I pounded away for about ten years, wore out a couple of typewriters, and had reams of drivel. But I did learn how to write flying scenes.

So anyway, I got a divorce in 1984 when I was working for the oil company. And I decided, “Now’s the hour! I’m going to actually write that novel I’ve always wanted to write.” I was at the point in my life when I needed a personal triumph. My personal life was a disaster. My oil company was in trouble, in financial trouble. And I didn’t like being a lawyer. So I just needed to accomplish something. I didn’t expect the novel to ever be published, but just completing a novel - writing the whole thing right from word one to The End - was important.

I think a lot of people have these type of goals. You know, they have nothing to do with making money. They want to ride a bicycle across America. They want to climb all the 14,000-foot peaks in Colo. Or float down the Mississippi on a raft. And I tell people, they ought to go do it. They ought to fulfill some of these kinds of ambitions. Because that’s what makes life worth living. It’s certainly not money. And it’s certainly not the day-today grind.

We need some of these type of challenges. For me, writing a novel was one. So I got my secretary to show me how to use a word processor. So I’d work at night after everybody else’d go home. I’d sit down there and write from 6 to 10 or 11 at night, and then come in Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays and write for ten hours a day. And at the end of six months, I had a manuscript!

8 *His main character - Jake Grafton, the pilot - is also the main character in a series of his novels since then. By the turn of the century, Jake Grafton had moved up the line and become an admiral. But in Flight of the Intruder, he was just starting with the Navy.*

He was just everyman. He was not wise or witty or handsome or a lady-killer or any of that. He was just every guy who went to Vietnam. And the only distinguishing characteristic he had, that other people didn’t share, was that he always tries to do the right thing.

The public likes that. I get a lot of mail, and people tell me they really like Jake Grafton, and that’s one of the reasons.

9 *Coonts had no trouble writing the flying scenes for his first book, but his editors weren’t too crazy about his first drafts of love scenes.*

I was in the process of getting a divorce, and love wasn’t my thing at the time. So - but anyway, I remember talking to the Senior Editor. And she said, “You know, when I read the flying sequence about the pilot who’s on the ground, and he asks his friend to kill him, she says, “I almost cried.” But she sez, “Then when I read the love chapters, I almost puked on the manuscript.”

(laughs) I think that that’s - there’s a lesson there. So I ended up writing those chapters eight different times. Boy met girl eight different ways. They fell in love eight different ways. The final way it got put together was sort of an amalgam of little pieces, snippets here and there of all eight versions.

I’ve often thought I should take those 24 chapters and put them all together and call them “Love Stories ...”

Anyway, they were pretty bad. But it’s all learning how to write, which is the craft. But it’s not easy. You meet people who say, “Well, I’ve finished my first manuscript, and I’m ready to get published.” You always just look at them and say, “You don’t have a clue.” And I think a lot of people don’t. They think this is easy stuff. One pass through it, and it’s perfect. What they don’t see is the endless hours and the chapters that get trashed, and the editor who calls back and says, “This isn’t good enough. You have to do it better.” That whole process of acquiring the craft.

11 *You became a best-selling writer, right off the starting block. How’d you do that?*

SC: Well, it took a lot of skill and cunning. The book finally got edited, *Flight of the Intruder.* We edited the heck out of it, and it was finally ready to get published, and they called me up and asked me if I knew anybody famous. They said, “Well, we need somebody to send this to, to get those blurbs, those puffs that go on the back of the book.”

Steve suggested they send it to John Lehmann, secretary of the Navy, who used to be a Navy flier.

Well, he read it and loved it! So he sent it over to the White House with a note, “To Ron from John. Here’s a book you might like.”

And then he had an amazing stroke of luck.

It landed on the President’s desk at the same time as, the same day a reporterphotographer team from Fortune Magazine showed up to do an article on President Reagan as “Reagan the Manager.” And you open the magazine to the cover story, and it had, on the left side was a full-page picture of the President at his desk in the oval office. And there were only two things on the desk. One was a jar of jelly beans, and the other was a copy of *Flight of the Intruder*, by Stephen Coonts. Recognizable dust jacket on it.

The secretary was reading the magazine, and she saw the book on the pres’s desk. And she went running through the halls, shouting, “It’s on the president’s desk! It’s on the president’s desk!”

So the Naval Institute mobilized its staff, all fourteen of them, and they went out and bought every copy of Fortune they could find within five miles of Annapolis. And they stuck arrows on the picture and wrote little notes, and sent those to reviewers all over the country to whom they had sent review copy of *Flight of the Intruder.*

So this book by an unknown author from West Virginia, a first novel, that normally wouldn't even be reviewed by most publication, got reviewed nationwide. And the reviews always started, "This book was on the President's desk." And so that was a huge, huge help in getting the book some attention.

And it was on the best-seller list for 28 weeks.

13 *After Flight of the Intruder hit the best-seller list, Coonts started writing a sequel. But his editor at the Naval Institute Press did not exactly jump at it.*

I did 150 pages of manuscript and sent it to him, flew to Annapolis, took him and his wife out to dinner, pulled out all the stops, trying to get them interested in this story and they just couldn't do it. So finally he came to Colorado and took me out to lunch, said "You can't write this story. You don't have the writing skills. You can't do Arabs. You can't do women. All you can do is guys in the cockpit and guys on steel ships. And so we don't want the book." You know, Duh da duh!

And so, you know, that really bummed me out. At least he paid for the lunch. I didn't get anything done for about three months. And finally one day, I just thought, well, if that's all it takes to kill a writing career, I'm not ever going to have one.

So I got mad about it. I took my 159 pages and sent it off to three NY publishers that wanted, that expressed interest in my next book. All three of whom, of course had rejected *Flight of the Intruder.*

He got three offers and decided to go with Doubleday.

And I think there's a great lesson there for everybody. And I tell writers, you know, rejections, it only takes one yes. No matter how many publishers tell you no, it only takes one yes. And so don't be discouraged when people keep saying no, no, no.

When Jake Grafton came back from Vietnam, he had to put up with a lot of people assuming that he liked killing people. He had to put up with his future father-in-law, telling him he was a war criminal. And yet, he knew the cost of what was happening.

Yeah, he did. I played with that theme in *The Intruders,* the direct sequel to *Flight of the Intruder*, even though it was written six or seven years after I did *Flight of the Intruder*. One of the scenes in it is Jake, after his father-in-law has given him a hard time, he's waiting in the airport in Seattle. Somebody says to a soldier there that has a missing hand, said to him, "Serves you right." And Jake throws the guy through a plate glass window.

That actually happened to a friend of mine in Vietnam who stepped on a land mine and lost his left arm and was really - spent a year in the hospital. He was really tore up bad. It was a miracle he made it. He was on the campus of the University of Denver, and some guy said to him, "Did you get that in Vietnam?"

And he said yes, and the guy says, "Just serves you right" and marched off, some prissy little jerkwad who thought that he knew all about Vietnam, and it was wrong, and the people who got drafted and had to go over there and fight were some kind of criminals. You know, and I think that that just captured the tone of the moment, so I used that sequence.

Well, that guy probably didn't get to throw the guy who said that through a plateglass window, but Jake Grafton did it for him, didn't he?

Yeah, that's the fiction. Jake gets to do the things that you wish you had been there and done.

14 I had a psychiatrist say to me, "Well, if you aren't Jake Grafton, perhaps he's the man you wish you were." And he thought, "Oooo that's heavy." But of course, there's a little bit of truth in that in that, you know, there's a little bit of the author in every character they write, even the bad ones. The bad guys, the good guys, the villains, all of them. What you read in fiction is the author's view of the world, how the author thinks people think, how they feel, all this stuff.

16 *Steve Coonts loves to juxtapose the boring with the startling. Here is Eaton Steinbaugh, living an ordinary life in middle America, while he secretly blows up the Chinese missile supply. People and things are often not what they seem in Coonts' novels. And here's another one of those kind of characters. A kindly hitman from the book, Under Seige. He's been hired to kill the President, the Supreme Court Head Justice, and other important officials. His name is Henry Charon.*

Yeah, that's the name of the boatman across the river Stxy in classical Greek mythology.

Charon? And the River Styx goes to -

To Hades. He was the person who ferries the souls over to Hades.

In this reading, he's out in the woods testing some weapons he wants to use to shoot the President. And he sees a deer and turns gentle.

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17 He was only 25 feet or so from her when she finally saw him. She had moved unexpectedly. Now she stood stock still, her ears bent toward him to catch the slightest sound. Henry Charon remained motionless. She relaxed slightly and started forward him, her ears still attuned, her eyes fixed on him.

Surprised, he moved a hand.   The deer paused, wary, then kept coming. “Someone tamed her!” he thought. She’s tame.” The doe came to him and sniffed his hands. He presented them for her inspection and scratched between her ears. Her coat was stiff and thick to his touch. He stroked her and felt it. He spoke to her and watched her ears move to catch the sound of his voice.

The memory must have been strong. She seemed unafraid. The moment bothered him somehow. Man had changed the natural order of things, and Henry Charon knew this change was not for the better. For her own safety, the doe should flee man, yet he had not the heart to frighten her. He petted her and spoke softly to her as if she could understand and watched in silence when she finally walked away. The doe paused and looked back, then trotted off into the trees. She was soon lost from sight. Thirty seconds later, he could no longer hear her feet among the leaves that carpeted the ground.

An hour later, he arrived back at his car. He opened the trunk and got some targets which he posted on the wall of the ramshackle farmhouse. The pistols were first. All nine mm, he fired them two-handed at the target at a distance of ten paces. There were four pistons, all identical Smith and Wesson automatics. He fired a clip full through each. One seemed to have a noticeably heavier trigger pull than the others, and he set it aside.

When he finished, he carefully retrieved all the spent brass. If he missed one, it was no big deal, but he didn’t want to leave forty shells scattered about. After he posted a fresh target, he took the three rifles and moved off to 50 yards. The rifles were Winchester Model 70s and 3006, with 3 X 9 variable scopes.

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So here’s this guy who doesn’t want to frighten a deer. And then half an hour later, he’s practicing with his rifles to kill the president.

Yeah, well, there’s a little humanity in each of us, and that’s what makes characters fun to read about. They’re not cartoon characters. They’re not the guy who jerks off fingernails. They’re real people who do horrible things. And unfortunately, those are the villains among us. They’re real people who do bad things and then go home and eat breakfast like everybody else.

19 *How do you think up these complex plots?*

I tell everybody it’s bad pizza. Late at night (laughing). You wake up in the middle of the night, and you’re having nightmares. That’s it! That’s the good stuff. And you write it down.

I dunno. It’s never as easy as you wish it was. You know, you have ideas and you play with the pieces. You get a piece here and a piece there. And read some of it in the newspaper. I talk it over with my wife, Deborah. And you just keep trying to come up with a story that’s interesting, that will be properly paced, that will have enough unexpected twists to keep the reader riveted, that will have fun characters, interesting characters. They may not be good people, but they'll be fun to read about.

And if you can get the mix right, then you've got a good story. And if you don't, then you don't have it. So you just keep tinkering and twisting and writing.

20 *Well, you obviously keep up with modern technology. It's laced through all your books. How do you keep up?*

Well, it helps to have people to ask questions of. People who are smarter than you are and have more extensive experience in, for example, submarines. *America,* my last novel, features nuclear-powered submarines. And I don't know much about them. So you ask questions, you read all the literature you can find on submarines. Then you go find people who have served on them and know a lot about them. And you ask them specific questions.

Finally, after you've done your story, you ask those people to review the manuscript and make comments. Some of the comments you don't use. Sometimes they may tell me things, like "Well, you got this wrong. We wouldn't do it this way." For example, I had a submarine expert - a retired admiral, as a matter of fact - looked at America and said that when a submarine gets under way, they don't use a tug. A tugboat doesn't pull them out. They get under way on their own power, back away from the pier under their own power.

And I thought, Eh, I need the tug. The tugboat is an integral part of the plot. Because it's from the tug that the hijackers actually steal the submarine, by forcing the two boats together. Without that, I have to think up another way to hijack this submarine, and I don't know that I have a more plausible way, and so, that stayed in there. And that's typical. Sometimes you just have to twist it to tell a story. You have to have a story all figured out. This is really not about technology. It's really about storytelling.

24 *Has the government asked you to apply your mind to what the international terrorists -the real ones - might actually do?*

Well, amazingly enough, there was a proposal that all these movie screenwriters and thriller writers sort of get together and brainstorm. But to be quite honest with you, I thought it was ridiculous. I get my ideas from reading the newspapers and also from talking to experts, who know a lot more about it than I do. And that's the way all novelists and fiction writers do. They take what's possible, then try to come up with what's plausible.

There's nothing I've written that any dedicated terrorist hasn't come up with. And I don't write how-to books. Nor could I point to any other novelist or screenwriter who does. I just think that's a ridiculous thing. When I was asked about it, I said, "Nah! I don't want anything to do with that. Those people are idiots!" (K laughs)

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24 *I interviewed Stephen Coonts at his Pocahontas County farm, at a desk in front of big window, high on a hill overlooking a field. It felt - no surprise - like the cockpit of an airplane.*
His farm is near Marlinton, quiet little town. As I drove through Marlinton, I told Coonts, I was thinking "This is a great place for an international intrigue (they laugh)." Quiet little town, however, a little Neo-Nazi compound nearby, and national observatory nearby and so forth.

Do you ever think of writing a book set here, put Jake Grafton here?

Not Jake Grafton. Bu I've thought about for years doing a story. In fact, I've actually written one, called *The Garden of Eden*. My publisher was horrified. It was not a thriller. It was contemporary, about the people I met here in West Virginia and have known all my life.

They were horrified. They said all these people who are buying all these thrillers won't want the book, and you'll kill your thriller sales. Anyway, that was their take on it. I'm rewriting the book at the present time, and - who knows? - maybe it might come out in a year or two, maybe under a psyeudonym. So we'll see.

If you're going to make a living, writing stories, you have to sell them in major numbers. This is a numbers game. I'm a full-time writer. I have been since 1986. And it takes a lot of books to make a living. You have to keep cranking them out one at a time.

Unfortunately, authors are known as brands. You become a brand. And you take huge financial risks if you play around with the brand. So neither the publisher nor most authors who are successful want to do that, because if you stumble, the losses are catastrophic.

But he's thinking of taking that risk.

But anyhow, at some point, you just have to suck it up and say, "I just don't want to do one type of story all my life." So I've done a few things. I've done The Cannibal Queen, which is a story about flying an old airplane all over the United States.

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Maggie Anderson

This material comes from an extensive interview with Maggie Anderson. The interviewer's question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Maggie Anderson.

Poems are included when they are needed for context for Maggie's thoughts about writing.

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1 *If you thought nobody was going to read or hear the poems you wrote, would you write them?*

Yeah, sure. Absolutely.

Why?

For me, there's some satisfaction in being able to articulate something that I don't seem to know how to articulate in any other way. Writing is kind of a double life. I live life, and then I write life. And they're both equally important. And if I stopped breathing in either one, it would be some kind of ending.

2 I don't think writers are any better or any worse than any other human being. But we are different from some other human beings who've made other choices. We've decided to spend a significant portion of our lives noticing caterpillars and cucumbers and other such things. And paying attention in a particular way, to the events of our own local world and the larger world. And to think about those in writing.

4 I know that when I was a child, I was a really productive daydreamer. I liked to just, mmm, look at things and imagine things, look in puddles, drag sticks around in puddles. My family didn't get television till I was maybe ten or twelve. I read. But I was also real interested in television.

4 *Did you always have the eye of a poet, do you think?*
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I know that when I was a child, I was a really productive daydreamer. I liked to just, mmm, look at things and imagine things, look in puddles, drag sticks around in puddles. My family didn't get television 'till I was maybe ten or twelve, something like that. I read. But I was also real interested in television.

I just remembered this actually not too long ago. One of the things I did was, I would get the newspaper where it told about the television programs. And we had this kind of square footstool, and I'd turn the footstool on its side, and I'd kind of pretend, I guess, to turn the knobs. And I'd sit there and stare at the footstool, watching TV (laugh).

When I think about that now, my parents must have thought I was nuts. And they did finally get a TV, shortly after that. But it was never as satisfying as the stool, what I imagined on the stool.

So you were sitting there making up little stories?

Yeah, I guess so. I would read the description in the newspaper, like it would say, Mickey Mouse Club and who was going to do what. And I'd watch it! I could see it! I knew all about it!

So I guess it has been from a very young age that I guess I was sort of able to entertain myself. I was an only child. I was alone a lot. And I read and I wrote, drew, watched the stool (laugh). Watched TV later.

Well, you know, Merle Haggard always encourages people, says, if you want to write songs, watch the movie in your head and just tell what happened.

That's exactly what it is! There's a movie in my head. And I just take notes. That sounds overly dramatic. But at least, when I was a kid, that seemed quite possible to do.

5 *So here's a love poem for a chair: a fat, upholstered, comfortable friend who's always there in disturbing times*

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Interior with Letter

Dear fat chair,
upholstered topiary,
your pillows are the size of cumulous clouds
tucked into horizon, and for months now
I have come to sit beside you.
I have come to lean my head on your arm,
to mumble and weep into your green lap.
Once you let me hit your side with my hot fist.
Once I ran away from you for no good reason;

fear of furniture. But now I've grown comfortable
enough with this conventional decor
and you are soft foliage to me,
rest for my weak leg and my shaky hands,
my unfurnished heart.
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You're taking an object that people usually don't think of as having people qualities, and you're giving it that.

I guess I really must think about things that way. But it is a poetic device. I guess, technically, it's called personification. But I guess I just really think there's some kind of sentience in everything. And so chairs and furniture are like friends to me.

10 I had an aunt in Rowlesburg whom I especially loved, my Aunt Nida. I'd go to her house a lot, whenever I could and spend time there. And after the supper dishes were done, we'd always sit on the porch. And her husband would sit out there too and chew tobacco and spit in a can.

And she asked about your poetry.

Yes. She asked to read my poetry. And she asked to read the books I read in college. And I remember one summer, in particular, I was in Morgantown, taking a summer school class in southern writers, and I was reading Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. And what we'd do, I'd read the books I was supposed to read, and then I'd leave them there. And during the week, she would read them. And then I'd come back the next weekend, and we'd talk about them.

It was a wonderful thing, kind of like getting two educations for the price of one. But she was a wonderful critic. She would read these books and get so excited about them. We'd talk about Faulkner, we talked about technique, we talked about those strange voices. We talked about Eudora Welty.

I wanted to write a poem to honor my Aunt Nita.

So here's a poem called "Sonnet for Her Labor."

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My Aunt Nita's kitchen was immaculate and dark,
and she was always bending to the sink
below the window where the shadows off the bulk
of Laurel Mountain rose up to the brink
of all the sky she saw from there. She clattered
pots on countertops wiped clean of coal dust,
fixed three meals a day, fried meat, mixed batter
for buckwheat cakes, hauled water, in what seemed lust
for labor. One March evening, after cleaning,
she lay down to rest and died. I can see Uncle Ed,

his fingers twined at his plate for the blessing;
my Uncle Craig leaning back, silent in red
galluses. No one said a word to her. All that food
and cleanliness. No one ever told her it was good.

12 During the Depression, Walker Evans, the famous Depression photographer, took pictures in Rowlesburg, among other places. Maggie wrote a series of poems about those pictures.

Now, I'm fascinated by your poems about Walker Evans. You've got it kind of out for Walker Evans.

Well, that's kind of interesting. I sort of do, have it out for him. See, what he did was, he came in here for some very good reasons, to photograph poor people during the Depression. And he wasn't poor. He was a fashion photographer in New York. And I think, he worked for the WPA, so he had this idea that he was doing a good thing for the country. He's also a wonderful photographer.

But there just something about the stance he took as he stood and photographed these representatives of poverty - however much good it might have done to bring public attention to the realities - that makes me feel protective of those people.

The weirdest thing was, when I was teaching this class at the University of Pittsburgh – and often because I like photographs, like to work with them - I assigned students to find a photograph. One of my students came in with a photograph she had found. It was a Walker Evans photograph of a cemetery in Rowlesburg, West Virginia, which happens to be the cemetery where my grandfather and my grandmother and some of my aunts and uncles who died before I was born were buried, right there in the cemetery.

And it just brought it really close to me that he was literally photographing my people. And I just sort of felt protective about that. I felt like, well, he doesn't

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13 *"House and Graveyard, Rowlesburg, WV 1935"*

I can't look long at this picture, a Walker Evans photograph
of a West Virginia graveyard in the Great Depression,
interesting for the sharp light it throws
on poverty, intimate for me because it focuses
on my private and familial dead. This is where

my grandparents, my Uncle Adrian and my Aunt Margaret
I am named for are buried. Adrian died at seven, long
before I was born. Margaret died in childbirth in 1929.
The morning sun falls flat against the tombstones
then spreads across Cannon Hill behind them. I see

how beautiful this is even though everyone was poor,

but in Rowlesburg nothing's changed. Everything
is still the same, just grayer. Beside the graveyard
is Fike's house with the rusty bucket, the tattered
trellis and the same rocker Evans liked. Miss Funk,

the school teacher, now retired, and her widowed sister
still live down the road out of the camera's range.
I remember how my Aunt Nita loved that mountain,
how my father told of swinging from the railroad
bridge down into the Cheat. Nita worked

for the Farm Security Administration too, as Evans did.
She checked people's houses for canned goods, to see
how many they had stored, and she walked the road
by here, every day. I can't look long at this picture.
It warps my history into politics, makes art
of my biography through someone else's eyes.
It's a good photograph, but Walker Evans
didn't know my family, not the distance
his careful composition makes me feel now
from my silent people in their graves.

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14 *With almost every line of these poems, you seem to be saying, "The photographer is saying that he's showing you what's going on, but he can't know."*

Yeah. I think that's true. A photograph gives you a picture of somebody's picture of what's there.

But doesn't a poem do that too?

Yeah. And that's the part where I can't be too critical of Walker Evans. Because I'm an artist too, and I understand what he's doing. And I think there's always that question of appropriation in art. Are you taking somebody's experience and using it for your own ends? Or violating it in some way?

17 *After Maggie's mother died, she and her dad moved back to West Virginia, to Buckhannon, and then to Keyser. She was already scribbling, but she didn't think real writers would write about small-town things or things they saw around them.*

I guess I didn't think it was really wrong to write about the things I saw around me. But all the poems that I was reading seemed to be about things that were far away. I just thought, "Who would want to know?" I mean, even the lives of my family seemed basically, just weird to me. You know, like who would want to read about that?

Then she heard Louise MacNeill, West Virginia's poet laureate at the time.

I'd never heard a poet give a poetry reading. And I hadn't read much poetry at all. And what we had read, I don't think - except for Emily Dickinson - that any of it was by women. And so when Louise McNeill came to Potomac State College in Keyser - which is where I lived and was going to high school - to give a reading, I went to hear it. And I'd never heard anything like that.

Anybody who's heard Louise MacNeill read can probably conjure her voice in your mind. It was an absolutely distinctive voice: a mountain accent and just a real connection to ancient rhythms of poetry. And I remember she had a hat on, and she had a blue dress. And when it came time for her to read, after she'd been introduced, she came out from behind the lectern and recited her poem, "Hill Daughter," which starts out, "Land of my fathers, blood of my fathers, whatever is left of your hate in the rocks, of your grudge in the stone, I have brought you at last what you sternly required that I bring you. And I have brought it alone."

And so she read that poem, and I thought about that. And I thought, "Boy, you could probably write about some things you know."

19 I think it's important to remember that when people have left West Virginia, a lot of times they have left out of economic necessity, it wasn't a big choice they made. It was like: where's there going to be a job? And I think that's true for miners, and I think it's true for teachers. And I think it's true for writers.

20 *After college Maggie tried to make a living as a writer in West Virginia, patching together various jobs. For part of one year, she was poet-in-residence in Mercer County.*

I was so alert and alive those days, that year, and so connected to the kids I was working with. And it was one of the most beautiful falls I think I've ever seen. And I was driving around these back country roads, talking about poems with these kids. And it was, it was great.

>>

21 *Spitting in the Leaves*

In Spanishburg there are boys in tight jeans,
mud on their cowboy boots and they wear huge hats
with feathers, skunk feathers they tell me.
They do not want to be in school, but are.
Some teacher cared enough to hold them. Unlike
their thin disheveled cousins, the boys on Matoaka's
Main Street in October who loll against parking meters
and spit into the leaves. Because of them, someone
will think we need a war, will think the best solution

would be for them to take their hats and feathers,
their good country manners and drag them off somewhere,
to Vietnam, to El Salvador. And they'll go.
They'll go from West Virginia, from hills and back roads
that twist like politics through trees, and they'll fight,
not because they know what for, but because what they know
is how to fight. What they know is feathers,
their strong skinny arms, their spitting
in the leaves.

>>

22 *Did you set out to write a poem about boys going off to war?*

No, not at all. I started out to write a poem I thought was going to be about teaching poetry in the schools and this guy with the skunk feathers, and probably it's better. If I'd started out to write a poem about boys going off to war, it would've had all the risks of highfalutin rhetoric and, you know, I'm-gonna-make-a-speech kind of thing. But here, it just sort of emerged out of the poem. Out of a couple of little pieces of logic. If they're not in school, where are they going to go?

23 *She's never been an ivory tower poet.*

I've worked as a poet in schools and communities, and I've taught classes in all grades. Taught in prisons. I've taught in senior centers and community centers.

25 *Your mother died of leukemia when you were very young.*

The memories I do have of her were mostly outdoor images, and they're very good memories. And I have a kind of recurrent memory of her that worked its way in some form into the poem.

>>

In My Mother's House

In the dream, she is never sick and it is
always summer. She wears a polished cotton
sundress with wide shoulder straps, sits calmly
in a wooden lawn chair, green, I remember

from a photograph. I wonder if she'll know me
now; but want to keep formality awhile. I shake
her hand and introduce her to my friends,
who seem more like my parents' friends than mine.

subdued, and gathering with wine glasses

on the grass. Then I'm in the house my mother's
lived in since her death and she has changed
her clothes, put on her plaid viyella shirt.

She's sitting in her attic, among suitcases
and webs of boxes. A yellow triangle of light
skims the floor into the lap of her wool skirt.
I have had to be resourceful to get to her,

climbing up a bright blue ladder to the window
that broke down as I came through, transformed
itself from glass back into sand. My mother
holds a glass jar in her hands. She seems

preoccupied, as if it's tiring to be dead.
I ask her, Are you weary? and she says, No,
are you? Yes, I say and move into her arms
for a minute only, then she says she must
be off, something pressing, like the weight
on my heart as I wake, alive now, but her body
with me still, and warm, in the silk stockings
without shoes they dressed her in for burying

>>

29 *And now, we're going to switch directions, cover another part of life. Here come a couple of Maggie's sensual poems. Love poems.*

>>

Company

We are making love underneath you. Our staggered
breathing is a rhyme scheme for your turning in the bed
upstairs. We giggle, and our noses grow teen-aged into the
pillows.

There is a contagion to this lust. We feel like a headline in
twelve-point Gothic, or an exhibitionist who doesn't know he's
being watched. As we rock each other, gently gasping, you do
not snore. You are truly our guest.

>>

31 *So you didn't – like in the movies – just sit down and start writing the poem and write it in your beautiful handwriting, and throw the pen away and then it was done?*

That never happens to me. I revise a lot, over and over again. It sometimes takes me two years to write a poem.

Is that fun?

Yeah! Yeah, it's a lot of fun. Actually, I had one poem that took me almost twelve years to write. I still really like this poem. And I think it was worth every ounce of labor that I put into it. Not giving up on it.

34 *And now, we'll go back to Maggie's whimsical side. A few years ago, she was wondering if vegetables go to sleep. So she wrote a series of poems about vegetables having dreams.*

There were two things that went into writing these poems. One, I was growing a pretty big garden. And the other things was that I was reading this book about dream psychology that sort of laid out different kind of dreams people had and told about what they meant. And so I got to thinking about, what if, what if vegetables had dreams. What kinds of dreams might they have? So it was a sort of little game I was playing with myself. I would sometimes arrive at the dream by looking at the way the yellow squash are. You know, crook-necked squash look curled-up, almost bashful. And I thought, "They would probably have a dream of being out on a busy street, missing some essential article of clothing." The kind of dream all of us have had probably!

>>

35 *Exposure*

The yellow squash sleep in skins covered by dirt
and their own extravagant leaves, large as their dreams
and as embarrassing. Because their bodies are both
crumpled and appealing, they dream of being utterly
naked on a busy street in a large city. They bend
the crooks of their necks to cover themselves and
curl up among their own stalks like shy bananas.
Suddenly they realize the crowd that has gathered,
if not applauding, is at least not throwing stones.
The pulp of the squash is as heavy as wet sand.
In full baskets, they reflect the sun.

>>

I love those things.

I do too. Actually, I had great fun writing them. I don't know any other poems I enjoyed writing more.

38 *There are lots of people who will listen to these programs who think, well, maybe I could write something. Got any advice for them?*

I'm a big believer in keeping diaries, journals, notes. And when you say that, people think, "Uh-oh, I can't do that, some kind of dutiful exercise or something, I'd have to sit down every day and write down what I did." You don't have to do that. You can write a sentence every day. You can write a word. You can write a color that you noticed today.

When it's nice weather, I walk to school. And it's about a mile to school. And one of the things I do as a kind of exercise for myself is try to notice all the yellow things on the way. And then when I get home, I'll write all the yellow things I saw today. Or the blue things. Or the green things. And if you give yourself a focus like that, it helps you sort of discipline your mind so you observe a little more closely.

Sometimes when I go for a walk, I notice doors. I do that when I travel a lot. One summer, everywhere I went I took pictures of doors. The pictures weren't the point. And I'm not a great photographer. The point was, to focus myself on a small thing in a lot of different places. And then just have a picture of it and write a little bit about it.

"To focus myself on a small thing." Now, you do that habitually. You focus on cucumbers, beans, tomatoes, moths. Any kind of small thing could probably produce a poem, couldn't it?

I think so. I think it's just those very small things that sometimes get squashed out in the daily run of our busy lives, that are often the most important things. I mean, it's a cliche, about stopping to smell the roses. But it's, there's truth in it. I mean, if you stop every day and just notice some little thing, your imagination - which is, I believe, like a muscle - will get stronger. And it'll help you notice things more often. With more regularity and with more care.

39 *Maggie wrote this next poem after she watched some out-of-state people who had come to West Virginia to learn to play Appalachian traditional music. They seemed to be approaching it as a musical exercise. And Maggie wondered if they had any idea how much hard living had produced that music.*

>>>

40 *Ontological*

This is going to cost you.
If you really want to hear a
country fiddle, you have to listen
hard, high up in its twang and needle.
You can't be running off like this,
all knotted up with yearning,

following some train whistle,
can't hang onto anything that way.
When you're looking for what's lost,
everything's a sign,
but you have to stay right up next to
the drawl and pull of the thing
you thought you wanted, had to
have it, could not live without it.
Honey, you will lose your beauty
and your handsome sweetie, this whine,
this agitation, the one you sent for
with your leather boots and your guitar.
The lonesome snag of barbed wire you have
wrapped around your heart is cash money,
honey, you will have to pay.

>>>

41 *" Honey, you will have to pay."*

Yeah, that's right, that's the nature of it, the nature of being. That's why I called it "Ontological." That was that big academic word I stuck on the top there, after I wrote the poem.

What does "ontological" mean?

It's the study of the nature of being.

One of the things that was important to me in writing that poem was getting the sounds of it just right. And in that poem and in a number of others, I've thought a lot about making the sounds of the poem do what the poem is about. And so, I felt like, especially in this one, it was important to do that. Especially since I was talking about the nature of being. Music has always been very important to me, as I think it is for many West Virginians.

Would you give some examples of words you chose because you thought they echoes the sound of the fiddle?

Well, a couple of them would be: "If you really want to hear a country fiddle, you have to listen hard, high up in its twang and needle." I was interested in the off-rhyme, and the echoing sounds of "the drawl and pull." I thought of that as the whine of a fiddle.

"Drawl" seemed to be talking - well, it's a word that refers to a certain kind of speech, so it refers to sound. And it just sounded, to me, like when a fiddle's been going duh duh duh duh duh for a long time, then suddenly go DING! And I thought, "That's like a drawl." Then you pull it back and it goes dyyyannng! Excuse my sound effects, but I thought that was kind of how it sounded. I liked that "drawl" and "pull" went together.

42 *Maggie Anderson also has a well-deserved reputation for thoughtful, insightful poems that address injustice. None better known than her poem, "Closed Mill."*

I was teaching in Allegheny County, Pittsburgh area for a year. I taught in almost every junior high school in Allegheny County. It was 1987-88. A lot of the mills had just closed down, and it was very painful to be working with those kids and seeing the ways their lives were being absolutely transformed by that economic loss.

43 *From Maggie Anderson's poem, Closed Mill.*

>>>

"Death to Privilege" said Andrew Carnegie,
and then he opened up some libraries
so that he might repay his deep debt,
so that light might shine on Pittsburgh's poor
and on the workers in the McKeesport Mill.
The huge scrap metal piles below me
pull light through the fog on the river
and take it in to rust in the rain.
Many of the children I taught today
were hungry. The strong men who are
their fathers hang out in the bar
across the street from the locked gates
of the mill, just as if they were still
laborers with lunch pails, released
weary and dirty at the shift change.

Suppose you were one of them?
Suppose, after twenty or thirty years,
you had no place to go all day
and no earned sleep to sink down into?
Most likely you would be there too,
drinking one beer after another,
talking politics with the bartender,
and at the end of the day,
you'd go home, just as if you had
a paycheck, your body singing
with the pull and heave of imagined
machinery and heat. You'd talk mean
to your wife who'd talk mean back,
your kids growing impatient and arbitrary,
way out of line. Who's to say you would not
become your father's image, the way any of us
assumes accidental gestures,
a tilt of the head, hard labor,

or the back of his hand.

From here the twisted lines of wire
make intricate cross-hatchings against
the sky, gray above the dark razed mill's red
pipe and yellow coals, silver coils of metal
heaped up and abandoned. Wall by wall,
they are tearing this structure down.
Probably we are not going to say
too much about it, having as we do
this beautiful reserve, like roses.

I'll say that those kids were hungry.
I would not dare to say the mill won't
open up again, as the men believe.
You will believe whatever you want to.
Once, philanthropy swept across our dying cities
like industrial smoke, and we took everything
it left and we were grateful, for art
and books, for work when we could get it.
Any minute now, the big doors buried under
scrap piles and the slag along this river
might just bang open and let us back inside
the steamy furnace that swallows us
and spits us out like food, or heat
that keeps us warm and quiet
inside our little cars in the rain.

>>

Anger, channeled into a poem.

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

44 *You know, people who want to write are always stopping too soon instead of revising. You got any thoughts about that?*

There's a couple of reasons for that. I think people stop because they think, "Well, I don't have any good ideas." And also, I think, it is a bit of a stretch to try to think of something that isn't a cliche or that isn't something we've heard over and over again.

You have to, you have to exercise your imagination, just like you have to exercise your body. It's not going to come right away. But if you try to think of more things and more things. Sometimes I'm like a coach, I'll say, OK, you've got four things down, try to think of five things, seven things. Just keep it going. And nine times out of ten, the ninth or tenth thing, somebody will go “ooo!” They’ve gotten somewhere.

Marc Harshman

This material comes from an extensive interview with Marc Harshman. The interviewer’s question or comment is sometimes included in italics, for context. Otherwise, all comments come directly from Marc Harshman.

Exerpts from books are included when they are needed for context for Marc’s thoughts about writing.

The audio tracks for this file are available, along with the entire hour-long conversation, at www.wvstories.com. The large numbers let you know which audio tracks to play to hear this material.

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2 I have been here in West Virginia a long time. I arrived at Bethany College in the fall of 1969. And except for graduate school, I’ve been here ever since.

His upbringing on a family farm in Indiana was a great start for a writer.

Even though we lived in the country and only got to town once a week for groceries, Mom and Dad always made that trip to town a trip to the local library as well. So as far back as I can remember, when I try to imagine who I was as a little boy, I see the old farmhouse, and I see the living room. And I see the braided rug in the middle of it. And myself sitting there with a pile of picture books beside me that we had brought home from the library. And my daddy sitting in another chair, a pile of books beside him, and my mother in yet another chair, a pile of books beside her.

And that was just part of life, to hear my father read stories and poems and my mother as well, and to gather at my grandparents’ supper table. It was around that table that we would sit for what seemed to me hours at a time, just talking and telling stories. Of course, if you were to go to my grandparents and said, “I hear you’re storytellers,” they wouldn’t have known what you were talking about. It was very natural. It was that place where, after the supper dishes were red up, we didn’t all go a hundred million directions at once, but simply sat there.

Now, us kids wouldn’t have put up with just sitting there. I remember Grandma kept a box of games in the bedroom behind that tiny little kitchen, and she’d bring those out. But nonetheless, there we were, young and old, small, tall, family, neighbors, people who’d just drift in, and the air was filled with talking. And of course, in the midst of that talking, the gossip: who was dead, who was dying, whose cattle were sick, what went on at Wednesday night prayer meeting. Intermixed in all that, we might hear a story.
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Maybe I'd hear Granddad tell about how his dad had hunted the last wildcat ever to be hunted in that very woods, behind that very house where we sat at that very table. Or maybe I'd hear Grandmama tell how her daddy had killed a black snake so long that when you strung it up over the telephone wires, it would touch the ground on either side. Ah, we loved stories like that.

3 Virginia Hamilton - my vote as America's finest writer of children's books - Virginia Hamilton says that - quote - all people are storytellers. And the most fundamental form of tale-telling is gossip, the delicious story of our everyday lives. And when those tales are shaped and polished, passed from one hand to another, from one generation to another, they transcend whatever they started out as and become, in her words, folk tale. Or in my words, they simply become Story. And that's what I was hearing at that supper table. And I don't think I've stopped listening ever since.

One of the things I like to tell parents and teachers both is that, with that table gone from the lives of so many of our children - and I say children in the larger sense - then it becomes our responsibility, isn't it, as teachers and educators, as artists, to recreate that story table, I like to call it. To recreate that story table wherever we can, be it in our schools, our community centers, our synagogues and churches, wherever. And when I say that, I don't mean that we have to become storytellers ourselves, as some sort of professional thing. No no, what I mean is simply that we recreate that time when we're simply sitting together. And not just us talking to them, but allowing our children to talk to us, to let them tell us their fledgling stories. And it's just so, so crucial.

4 When we come into a classroom, or come into any kind of assembly where there are children gathered, we have no idea what potential rests with these little bodies here before us. And the responsibility that places on us, therefore, to nurture in them a love of that magic and that humanity that we call stories.

5 *Marc's stories make their way into his brain in different ways.*

I suppose the most common source is the story of our own lives.

My very first book, *A Little Excitement,* is built, in large part, around one real incident that happened to me. I think before I describe that incident, though, I'd rather give you a sense of the book itself. *A Little Excitement* begins with a boy in the country. In fact, I rather like the words of the opening page. It says:

>>

“Winter on Pleasant Ridge had gone on long enough. Sure, I loved sledding and snowballs, snowballs and snow forts. But even they can become boring, especially when you live so far in the country that your only companions are a pair of older sisters. Half the time, they didn’t even want to play, and the other half, when they did, they were always too bossy.

Mom said maybe I was too fussy. Anyway, I was tired of winter and tired of being bossed. And what else was there? Not much. Get up, go out in the dark and carry hay while Dad milked. Eat, go to school, go home and carry hay again. Eat, study and put up with Annie and Sara. Not much fun, I can tell you.
>>

Well. It wasn’t the best of times for the boy. But one day, he found himself at his Grandmother’s. And they were talking. And she told him about her winters as a girl.

... of going to school on a sleigh driven by two black mares. Of blizzards that topped the roof of the old porch. Of her school being closed for weeks at a time. And he said to his Grandma, “Oh, if I could just have a little bit of excitement, something like what you had!”

And she said back to him, “Be careful what you wish for! You might just get it.”

>>

And that, of course, is exactly what happens.

6 As we turn the pages, we see this old wood stove glowing red-hot. And what has happened is that the father has overstoked the old wood stove one night, and it’s glowing hot, and it ignites a chimney fire. Catches all that old tar and soot inside the chimney and it explodes into this raging fire. And, as many good folks in West Virginia know, it’s a very dangerous thing. You can lose your whole house in that way.

Well, the story goes on from that point to show how the boy learns to work with those sisters, the three of them with their parents, and the parents with the neighbors. All of them gather round to try and save the house. And as we turn to the final page of the book, we see the house has not burned down. It’s a sunny morning, all’s in place, a beautiful snowfall, and the state bird of West Virginia, a cardinal, is there on the branch of the tree outside the house. It has a happy ending.

7 The real story is that - one winter, my wife Cheryl and I were living on Sally’s Backbone in southern Marshall County, a rather rural road. And it was after midnight. There was two feet of snow on ther ground, and the telephone rang. Never good when the phone rings after midnight. And it was my neighbor. And he said, “Marc,” he said, “you got a fire down at your place?” I sniffed the air. I didn’t smell any smoke, and I said, “No, I don’t think so.”

He said, “Well, look out your window.” And I looked out my window. And there, in front of our house was our car in a big ball of flames. It was really scary. I went racing down the stairs in my bare feet, out into the snow, and I stood, and I stopped, and I stared, and there wasn’t a thing I could do. But it was, as I say, truly frightening.

The car was next to the house, underneath some trees. I thought the trees would catch fire, fall on the house, the house would burn down. Well, that didn’t happen. As luck would have it, another neighbor coming home from the mine late, he and I put a chain to the back and drug the car out from under the trees, and the car burned up, but the house didn’t.

But a couple of months later, thinking back on that event, I began to create the story, *A Little Excitement,* my first book. And you can see, of course, as I say to the children, you can see that what I did was take the snow, the fire, the isolation of living so far in the country that the fire truck couldn’t get there. I took my memories of being a boy on the farm. I took that ice cube feeling in my stomach from having been truly frightened. And I took the fact that, although I had not had a chimney fire, I did heat my house with wood, so I knew exactly how a chimney fire could happen. So I took all those real things, let my imagination play with them a little bit and created the story, *A Little Excitement.*

8 *So you can take a couple of details - or a whole bunch of details - from your own life, and then just make up some things and put it together in a story. Lot of times, people think they’ve got to stick to the truth.*

No, no, as you can see there, you can take the truth and fictionalize it. I have to admit, I do have one story where I didn’t stray very much. My second book, *Snow Company,* is the story of a blizzard that occurred when I was about ten or eleven years old. And although my mother says, “Well, it didn’t really happen that way,” it is the way it happened to me in my memory.

When I wrote the story out, I can’t say that I fictionalized much. Whatever fictionalization had gone on had begun when I was ten and eleven years old, and I’d been building it ever since. But as an author, I wasn’t aware of doing it. This is how the story had finally crystalized in my own mind.

The story is a simple one. School was let out early. My brother and I had come me home. We hadn’t been home very long, and there was a knock at the door. (He knocks.) Mom, my brother and I looked at each other, and said, “Well, who’d be coming to visit in the middle of a blizzard?”

So I went, and here’s this man, and his truck’s gotten stuck in the snow drift in the old country crossroads. And he wants to come in and get warm. Mother says, “Sure, let him in.”

He hasn't been in the house ten minutes when (knock, knock, knock) there's another knock at the door. And this time it's a woman. Same problem. She's gotten stuck in the drifts and wants to get warm. She comes on in, and seems like there are more knocks (knock knock knock), and before long, we have a house full of strangers. My mother puts a big pot of chili on the stove, and we eventually sit down to supper with these strangers
What a wonderful event it was.

For a boy, it was absolutely magical. And of course, everybody's got a story to tell! You get adults together during snow weather. Blizzards! And oh, I remember the storm of 1939, or I remember the one of 1950! And off they're going! And there I am, as a boy, sitting there listening. It was wonderful! Just great.

And he put some of the actual stories people told into the storybook...

The temperature fell so quickly that the pet duck got frozen in the horse trough. I had to go chop him free with an ax. It's all gravy! It's all gravy.

9 *Could we hear a little bit from Snow Country?*

Sure. I'll do the ending. I think you've got the story.

Of course, the storm just gets worse and worse, and these people are not going to be able to go home. The electricity goes out, which just makes the storytelling all that much better, because Mother has to light candlelight. And eventually, she begins to make pallets for them on the floor and beds them down in the old living room next to the stove. And we go off to bed.

>>
"I remember waking up at night and seeing the moon slipping in and out of the clouds. Knowing the storm is breaking up. Very quiet, as deep snow often is. And I tiptoe out to the living room and see all these people sleeping there, these strangers sleeping there who are now our friends. And I think to myself how glad I am to see them, glad for it all. The snowy night, our house, the quiet. Glad I'll have my own story to tell, next time company comes.
>>"

10 *You went to Yale Divinity School.*

Yes, I did.

That is bound to attach itself to your children's books.

I'm sure it has, in rather unconscious ways, throughout my career. Of course, when I was in divinity school, I wasn't there to become a pastor. I was caught up in the whole creative mythology discussion, all the Joseph Campbell materials that were so popular in the sixties.

So you were caught up in the storytelling.

Yes, I was caught up in the storytelling, just in love with those ancient stories.

11 *Some of Marc's stories don't have much to do with his own life - on the surface, anyhow. He's always got his ears wide open, listening for stories.*

Rocks in my Pockets, my third book, came to me by listening. Only in this case, I was very lucky, listening to one of America's premier storytellers, Bonnie Colllins, an old, old friend.

In that case, the editor of a heritage magazine asked Marc and his wife Cheryl Ryan - a fine children's book writer herself - to go interview Bonnie Collins at her home.

A little log cabin there on the banks on Mackelroy Creek down in Doddridge County. We went down, had a quick lunch, turned on the tape recorder and I said, "Bonnie, tell us a story." And she told us a story. And when she had finished, we said, "Tell us another, please." And she told us another. And another. And another. And another. And we did not turn off the tape recorder till supper time. And a more wonderful, magical afternoon, I don't believe I've ever spent. And one of the stories she told us was *Rocks in My Pockets.*

As I recall, the story was maybe a third of the length it is now. More of a bright, snappy joke. Wonderful. And the moment I heard it, I knew this would make a terrific picture book in its own right. I went home and began to work on it.

12 *Rocks in My Pockets*, by Marc Harshman and Bonnie Collins. He wrote up the story she told in the first part of the book, then he just kept going! Made up some more! Here's the first part.

>>>
"To start at the beginning, the Woods family lived on top of the top of the highest mountain in these parts , way up where the wind is your neighbor all year round. The farm was on old rocky soil, but it was the best the family could afford. And so they worked out a living any way they could. They'd raise knee-high corn and walnut-sized potatoes and call them a good crop. You'd hear no complaints.

Their house was drafty, their animals skinny, and their clothes patched out of what was at hand. But one thing they all did have was pockets. And that was mighty important. From the pockets, they carried the rocks. Yes, rocks.

Every morning when they'd set out to work, Father and Mother, Grandpa and Tommy and Jenny, Father would always say, "Be sure you put them rocks in your pockets, now. Be sure you put them rocks in your pocket, or the wind will be likely to blow you away."

And he was right. For the wind did blow fierce across their mountaintop fields. So father and mother, Grandpa, Tommy, and Jenny would pick up some of those rocks, carry them off in their pockets off into the fields. And not a one of them was ever blown away.
>>

So this is where Marc starts adding to the story.

13 *>>>*
In the evenings after supper, Grandpa or Mother or Father would often tell a story they remembered from the early days. As the tales were told, you might see one or the other of them rubbing those rocks in their hands. In the cold of winter, those same rocks would be set into the fireplace, then taken out and wrapped in heavy socks

to lay between the cold covers to warm up the beds. They were, as any of the family could have told you, mighty handy rocks.
>>

Mighty polished rocks too, after all that handling. In his addition to the story, Marc made up a couple of city women who come to the farm looking for antiques. They go crazy over the polished rocks. And they insist on buying them. Gotta have them.

>>
And were those ladies thrilled! The way they talked, there wouldn't be anybody in all of Pittsburgh or New York of wherever they came from who had stones like these. And so they went back to their homes, put their stones on display and bragged all over them.
>>>

And their city friends go crazy over the rocks too. And pretty soon, people are beating a path to the Woods house, wanting to buy some of those rocks. And of course, a few people don't want to spend the money, and they think it'll be just as good if they pick a few up in a field.

>>
And they'd tell Father Woods that those there by the chimney corner weren't quite right and ask him if he knew where they might find some similar ones. And Father Woods, being an honest man, would tell them. And those folks, eyes as big as slab-sided sandstones, would go gather up a heap of field rocks. They thought they were mighty clever, not having to pay Father Woods that way. Cheating him, don't you know.
>>>

They don't see the difference between rocks polished by all that loving handling and plain old field rocks.

>>
And nobody back in the city was ever impressed with them either. And those folks that took them will never, ever figure out why. I guess they never lived on the top of the top of the highest mountain. Never carried those rocks in their pockets all day long, hoeing, stooping, spraying, summer, fall and winter. Never played pass with them. Never curled under a blanket with those rocks nestled between their feet. Never sat around a fire rubbing those rocks while the old stories of the hard work and patience filled their heads. No. No, I bet they never did. But I have. I have. And these rocks in my pockets still keep my feet on the ground in even the windiest weather.

>>

14 *Your story works on a lot of levels. I was just talking with a fiddler who was talking about people who come in for a few weeks to get some West Virginia culture. They will learn a few things and take it back like the people bringing the rocks back. And not really know what went into making that tune, the generations of people who polished the tune.*

I wouldn't want to castigate everyone who's taken a stone home. I pick up stones myself. And stories. I think some people can come in, and if they've done their own kind of work before arriving, those folks have a better chance of taking home a stone and knowing and appreciating its value.

Well, they never would've asked Mr. Woods where they could find some other rocks. They would have known that his were the real rocks.

That's right! That's it, in a nutshell. They would have known that they had to have one of Mr. Woods' or not at all.

So. Some of my stories come from real life. Sometimes I've tinkered with that real life more than others. Some stories come from listening, as I say, whether it's listening to a real voice such as Bonnie Collins, or listening to that inheritance of voices we see when we find a printed folk or fairy tale. And some stories however, as I say with a wink to the children, (whisper) I don't know where they came from. It's as if they came by magic.

15 My book, *Only One.* First, before I come to the magic, you know that, to be good at anything in this life, you have to practice. You can't be a great ball player, simply by watching the games on the tube. You've got to get out and run and throw and pass and dribble, whatever the sport is.

You can't become a great musician simply by listening to the music. You have to practice your instrument, your flute, your piano, your fiddle. The same's true for a writer. I can't simply read, wonderful and enriching and feeding and nurturing as that is. I do need to do the practice, the actual writing. So I try to make sure that there I am at my desk, scribbling away on those days. Seeing what will happen.

Well, one afternoon in Moundsville, many years ago, I was sitting at our home on Fifth Street then, scribbling away, trying to make one word go together with another one here, make some spark happen. And all of the sudden, the magic descended. And I wrote down these words: *There may be a million stars. But there is only one sky. (sound of scribbling)*

There may be a million stars, but there is only one sky.

I didn't know what that meant nor where it was going, not for sure. I didn't know if that was going to be the first sentence of the great American novel, or if it was going to be a poem or a song. I really didn't! But I liked the sound of those words. So I began to play with them. And here's what happened.

>>>

There may be a million stars. But there is only one sky. There may be fifty thousand bees, but there is only one hive. There may be five hundred seeds, but there is only one pumpkin. There may be one hundred patches, but there is only one quilt. There may be twelve eggs, but there is only one dozen.. There may be eleven cows, but there is only one herd.. There may be ten cents, but there is only one dime...

He keeps counting down until he gets to...

But the best thing, the best thing of all is that there's only one me. And there's only one you.
>>>

16 When I come into a school, so many schools have given me their own versions of *Only One*. And they've put in a whole different set of words. A boy just today said, "There may be sixty guests, but only one haunted house." And I've had others say, "There may be ten thousand trees, but only one forest." And on and on! And it's so wonderful. It's a great little formula to play with, and I'm glad that so many children have enjoyed it.

19 Marc Harshman's book, *The Storm*, piled up a lot of awards. It was a Junior Library Guild Selection, a Smithsonian Notable Book for Children, a Childrens' Book Council notable Book for Social Studies and a Parents Choice Award recipient.

The Storm is a result of a couple of sources coming together. The magic of *Only One,* which we can also call imagination. And the real-life background. I grew up in tornado country, in Tornado Alley. I remember as a little boy, Mom and Dad taking me to a second story of the old farmhouse and pointing towards town and seeing our little farm town all on fire because a tornado had gone roaring through an hour earlier.

I remember, a few years later, after my father lost the farm, we still lived in the country though, my brother and I were out playing in the field, a fallow field out behind the house, and Mother came to the back stoop and screamed at us to come to the house. We ran to the house, maybe noticing the sky was black off to the West and green and yellow. And got us inside. She took us to her bedroom and said, “If we see the funnel cloud, we’ll crawl under my bed.”

I remember that, even though it was noon, it became as black as midnight. And the house began to shake. I don’t remember crawling under the bed, although, saying that, I think perhaps we should have crawled under the bed! But that kind of storm passes very quickly. Although we were scared, in a few minutes, it was gone. An hour, couple of hours later, we learned that farms just north of us had just disappeared off the face of the earth. So somewhere, tucked inside that blackness had been a real funnel cloud, tornado.

One of his old Indiana friends - who figured that Marc had defected to West Virginia - challenged him to write a story set in Indiana.

And Jeb said, “Marc,” he said, “when are you going to write a Hoosier story?” And he went home, and that idea stuck. And I thought, “You know, I should write a tornado story.”

20 The narrator, the boy who tells the story is a boy in a wheelchair. Some children had told me my earlier childrens books were largely a recreation of myself. And perhaps somewhere in my mind, I was thinking, “If this boy’s in a wheelchair, that’s enough different from who I am and who I have been that it will demand a different sort of voice. And mind you, one of the schools where I was a grade school teacher, we had a wheelchair-bound population, so it wasn’t unfamiliar to me. And hopefully that worked. Because I’ve never lived in a wheelchair.

21 *A reading from that book, The Storm*

>>
School had gone just fine until then. Just an everyday class. And just like the beginning of every tornado season, the teacher began going over the usual information about the safety drill and the storms themselves. Explained the map of school exits, showed a few slides, described what to do if caught in one. It was then Roger had piped up and said, “It must be real scary for Jonathan!”

Jonathan stuck in his wheelchair is what he means, Jonathan muttered to himself. This was what he hated. Just this. Being singled out, different. And of all things, a storm. There were things he was scared of. But storms weren’t one of them. He loved storms. He loved those evenings when he and Dad would watch a thunder storm and its spidery lightening boom and flash the darkness into daylight.

What he was scared of was much more more common and everyday. Cars, trucks, the squealing of tires on pavement. He could still see as as if in a freeze frame the red truck before it blindsided him crossing US 40 under the flashing light. And he was scared of moments like these around others, when he realized that everyone was thinking about him. Or not really him, but his condition, his legs, his inability to use them, his wheelchair.

He hated those moments when he felt everyone looking at him. He dreaded this as much as the flashbacks because this happened more often.
>>

School lets out, and he rides the schoolbus home.

>>>
What I really hate is this heat, Jonathan complained to no one in particular as he wheeled himself away from the bus and down a long drive to the house. Everything sticks to me in this chair. He was happy though, to see his mom on the porch, knowing that she now understood now about not meeting him at the bus.

"Jonathan, this car's giving me fits again. Dale said he'd take a look at it if I brought it in right away. I should be right back in plenty of time. But supper's made if I'm not. Just put it in the oven. Your dad's still at Reynolds' working on that roof. I got the cows in the barn and chickens fed. Storm's coming, Martha told me, she's never wrong. Oh, and if I run late, could you get the horses?"

"Sure, Mom." He smiled. "Don't worry. I'll take care of them."

Ducking into the car, she yelled, "Thanks!" and drove off.

22 *Ever since the accident, Jonathan had done everything he could - and his therapist as well - to make the rest of his body as strong as possible. Mom and Dad had helped a lot too, making changes in the house, adding ramps outside, putting rope handles on the barn doors, low enough to reach. They'd even adjusted the horse halter, so it was easier for him to snap on a lead rope. It all helped.*

Since he was already out, he decided to go ahead and whistle the horses into the lot. It wasn't easy, but a short while later, he was rolling himself back out of the root cellar towards the horse trough, carrots laying carefully across his lap.

Back in the barn, he turned on Dad's milking radio. "A line of thunderstorms approaching east central Indiana have severe hail and lightning and a tornado watch has been issued for Wayne, Randolph, Jay, and Delaware counties..."
>>

23 *Jonathan knows that "tornado watch" isn't a real warning of a tornado. It just means one is possible.*

>>
But that rising wind. He wasn't sure he liked the low wail of the wind that began moving through the farm yard, nor the green-yellow tint of the sky. They were signs the oldtimers said meant twister. "Better get to seeing about closing things up," he said to himself. "Who knows?"

The radio was still running the same advisory. Wind, hail, tornado watch. He called to the horses, reached up from his chair and undid the latch, backing away as the gate swung open. Buster nuzzled his ear as he wheeled along beside them into the barn. Once inside, he gave them each a scoop of oats. Usually, he liked to linger here, thinking and talking. But as he felt the barn creak and moan under the wind, he turned himself back out to take another look.

He could hear now a continuous rumble of thunder, and to the southwest, the sky had turned a deep, deep blue. Here and there it was fractured by lightning. For a moment, the wind stopped. The cackling of the hens, the snorting of the hogs, the chittering of the birds, all went silent.

Then a sharp whistling rose up from somewhere. There was a worried nicker from Henry. Jonathan looked again at the sky. And there he saw it, saw the strange black thumb press itself down out of the bulging mass of clouds and stretch into a narrow tongue, just licking over the surface of the ground. Tornado.

It was so incredible that, for a moment, he simply stared. From the rise of the farmyard, he watched the snakelike funnel slowly twist across the distant fields and broaden into a larger blackness. Before his eyes, it become a black wall headed straight for the farm.

Fear replaced amazement. He hurried back across the lot. The wind was shrieking. But before he could get to the house, he heard horses. Looking back, there were Buster and Henry, tearing madly about the inner lot.

How could they have gotten out?
>>>

24 *And then Jonathan does something very brave. And after the tornado passes, he goes outside. Lots of destruction. And pretty soon, his parents come driving right through the field in his dad's truck.*

>>
"Thank heavens, you're all right!" his mom said, climbing out, running to him, hugging him. His dad was dead quiet for a long time while as he looked slowly around. Then he said, "Have a little bit of a storm here, son?" and put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

As Jonathan told him his story, he could see it all again, the blackness, the roaring of the wind, the funnel cry, the cries of the animals, how he'd had to bring the horses in and stay, the battering of the barn itself.

They listened. They didn't scold or baby him. He felt better than he had felt for a long time. He knew he had done a thing he could feel good about. He wouldn't care so much now when people looked at him. He knew they still would. They would still see his condition. But when they knew this story, they just might begin to see a lot more. They might just begin to see him, Jonathan.

>>

Jonathan. There's only one. You!

That's right! There's only one. There's only one of you, Jonathan.

25 *How do kids react when you read that story?*

It is amazing. If they know the story ahead of time, when I put that first slide up of *The Storm,* they all inhale at the same moment and go, Yes, yes! I mean, I don't think I was aware of the kind of emotional power that's in that story when I first wrote it. I really don't think I was. And I think it's been children's reactions to that story that have told me, gosh, I must have gotten this one just about right. (laughs)

Once again, I know that you weren't starting with a statement of values, then writing a story to match it. But in The Storm - look past the outward appearances. Don't be deceived by the wheelchair. Don't make snap judgements about people.

I think it's a temptation for us all. That's who we are as people. We want to judge somehow. Maybe it comes from an over-sense of self-righteousness. I dunno.

And who knows? I've just now this very moment thought of this in our talking, but there's more of me in that boy in the wheelchair than I thought. I mean, despite having a pretty comfortable life, nonetheless I remember as a boy being haunted by feelings of inferiority and lack of confidence. You know, I got picked on. Of course, everybody got picked on. But in your own mind, you blow that up to be, oh gosh, you're really low on the totem pole here, aren't you?

And maybe *The Storm* is just another way of getting back some of that. Reminding folks that we've got to go way beyond surface, we've got to go way beyond what outward circumstances might lead us to believe about a particular person.

26 *That's another magic thing about writing, isn't it? You can revisit things that were uncomfortable and make them come out different.*

Yes, yes. I mean, it does, it helps us to revisit our past in a lovely way. And I think there's no harm in reinventing it. (laughs)

That's what he did in his book, Uncle James. He modeled Uncle James on his great-grandfather.

Great-Granddad, was sort of the black sheep of the family. My children's book, *Uncle James*, is in fact, is actually the real prose telling of that story in many ways.

The story of Great-granddad begins with my memories of him as a little boy. By that time he was kept in a back room at Grandma and Grandpa's house. He was a drunk. And they'd take him to town to get his drink once a week. But he was very wonderful to us as children when he was sober. He would read books to us, and I would crawl up on his lap.

Lots of things. He was a gardener, and he read books. And I didn't know about the drinking until it was too late to have tarnished the image. You know?

27 *From his book, Uncle James.*

>>
He was my uncle, my mother's brother who had moved out West, "high in the western mountains," wrote Uncle James. We lived in Indiana where it is flat. We raised chickens and wheat and our father is dead. It took awhile before I could say that, but growing up this past year, I've learned to.

Uncle James wrote that he was going to help. We needed it that winter. We were hungry. The baby was sick and all of us tired from trying to keep the farm going. And of course, we all missed Father. Finally, I had to quit school to help out. Mother said, with the baby to look after, Ann and Elizabeth might have to leave school too. But I told her that, no Uncle James would be here soon and everything would be fine. We looked forward to his letters. He wrote that he was making real good money in the logging camps. He also told us great stories about life out West. "Listen to what this letter says today, children," Mom said.

"I got done early today. I had to kill two rattlesnakes outside my cabin, but that didn't take long. Then I got a bear with my old shotgun and brought it back to camp for supper." Another day we got a postcard. "The canyon in this picture was filled to the top with water yesterday, a real raging river, it was. We've had thirty inches of rain. I had to row to camp. But now I'm doing fine and still making money. I'll send some soon. Love, Uncle James."

Oh, is he the best uncle ever," Elizabeth said. We all nodded our heads, imagining a world so different than our own. It seemed like just yesterday a letter had said, "Great day in the morning! After I cut and stacked fifty giant pine trees, I started walking back, and what should greet me but a mountain lion! I only had my ax, but I aimed real good as he leaped, and oh, you should see the pretty rug I'm bringing you home, Sister. And a cap for Jimmy too. And tell the girls not to worry, I've got surprises for them too.

Such stories and promises of help sure helped brighten our evenings. I could hardly wait for Uncle James to come.
>>>

Meanwhile, things didn't look so bright. And times got tougher for them. But the postcards and stories keep on coming.

One shows a picture of a man on top of a forty-foot spruce with its limbs all cut off. Uncle James said it was him in the photo. He also said he better not send money through the mail, after all, because it might get lost. He'd bring it himself. Which wouldn't be long now.

Summer came, and they worked harder than ever. But things got worse.

And we keep hoping and praying that Uncle James would indeed come soon. And he did, knocking at the door late one September night.

>>>
Before we could get downstairs, Mom yelled up the stairs, "Y'all stay in bed. Everything's OK." But we had heard his voice and heard Mom say, "James Goodman, you're drunk!" I think we all tried not to hear that last part.

"But Mom, we want to see Uncle James. We've waited so long."

"No! Do as I say. Your uncle's tired and wants to rest. Now, hush!"
>>

28 *Turns out Uncle James made it all up. he didn't have any money, and his promises were phony. Mom tries to help the kids cope with their anger.*

>>

Mom also said that we still could use help. It would be up to Uncle James whether he was to be that help or not. I told Mom I hated him, and I wished he would leave and Ann and Elizabeth felt the same, and we'd get by somehow. Mom said that she agreed that we would get by somehow. She said the important question was, whether Uncle James would get by.

"Uncle James? Why should we care? He didn't care about us. All he did was lie to us and lead us on and take money from you and Dad. He's just an old drunk!"
>>>

His mom tries to help him understand alcoholism. And Uncle James tries to quit drinking.

>>>
Mom says it's an ache like a sickness that hangs on a man a long time, and that it will be a long time before he's well. But he's getting better, and he's a big help to us. He can scythe twice as fast as Mom or I. He already has all the winter wood cut. And even if he is sometimes awful quiet, he can be cheerful and funny. And he sure makes the work go faster with all his jokes and memories of life out West.

After supper, he sits down and tells us wonderful tales. He tells us the real true stories of life in the West, not just about rattlesnakes and mountain lions. Before bedtime, he'll tell us the stories we know aren't exactly true, the tall tales men told him around the campfires about men named Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill.

I still remember how much the disappointment hurt when those stories in his letters turned out to be untrue. I guess that's just the way some people are, making up stories to make real life seem better than it is. Mom says that's OK, as long as he remembers that he's the teller of the story and not the story itself. She says he knows again what's a true story now and what's a story story.

>>>

Uncle James ... a story story.

29 I recall, at some point, going back home and the family beginning to understand that I really was envisioning myself as an author, as a writer. And Grandmother going off somewhere and coming back and giving to me this old cigar box. And it was stuffed with all of her father's - stuffed with all his memorabilia. There were a couple of photographs. There was a slew of postcards which come into the story, Uncle James. And all this stuff. So I began to recreate and ask questions about this man, who had indeed been a drunk, who had not been faithful to the family. At one point, he had deserted and gone West for three years. What the drive was to do that, none of us are quite sure. Maybe it was that he wanted to make money. Didn't pan out.

But this man just grew and grew in my imagination, a man who I had known, in fact. I had a real clear picture of great-granddad Andy.

The same themes run through many of your books. Look past the surface. Value people. Give people another chance. People are special.

We are!

>>

32 *You've spent a lot of time in West Virginia now. What do you think should be preserved here? What is valuable in this place?*

Every square inch of it. Including those beautiful green mountains, which they should leave well enough alone! (laughs) I can't imagine another state that needs preservation more. I mean its people, its culture, its heritage, its landscape. It's so, so rich. There are certain old ways - and I say old in the best sense - old ways that are still occurring here!

I'm not the one to speak best about it. But uh -

Well, but aren't you speaking about it when you write about a family taking people in in a snowstorm or neighbors helping a family whose roof is on fire? Aren't you talking about what should be preserved?

Yes, of course, I guess I am. And a story like *Uncle James.* That we preserve the integrity of every individual, even those broken individuals in our midst. I know WV is a place that will do that. How many times I've seen my own neighbors take in the strays and the homeless.

It's something that can be lost out there in that false world we see bombarding us from the TV set. There's an older, truer way of life. And it goes on here. Although it is under dire threat, I would be the first to say as well.

33 *In the late 1990s, Marc and Cheryl had to leave their home and move to Wheeling. As he was feeling the pain of moving, Marc got an idea for another book.*

It was the summer we were leaving our mountain community, which really was a heart-wrenching experience. Cheryl and I had lived almost a decade in this rural part of Marshall County, but there it was. As we were gathered things, I remember cleaning out the old shed and finding a snakeskin in there and remembering two giant black snakes that lived in there one year and how they'd made me a little uneasy when they were on top of the rafters above my head.

By then, I had been teaching in the grade schools for many years. And I was always just dumbfounded by how many of my children had moved so many times in their young lives. And it had impressed upon me, more than ever, what a mobile society we live in, even in rural West Virginia.

So I took my memories of that move, then tried to imagine, What's it like for a kid? I'll read the beginning of the book, which captures that particular image I mentioned.

>>>

A snakeskin, white and light as air, tangled in old socks and rags. I found it under the rocking chair in the shed. Dad smiled and said he was glad I 'd found only that.

A month ago, Mom and Dad told me we were moving. I said, "Sure. That's OK." But it wasn't. Not only were we moving, but we were moving far away and to a town. No more woods across the road. No more Jimmy Tolson just down the road. But today there was this great snakeskin. I tried to forget the rest.

>>

And that book, Moving Day, will go on and show the various kinds of things the boy will uncover for his memories.

It's interesting. Marc still has his own Uncle Jack's tools, and the dad in this book has his Uncle Jack's tools.

34 *Can you paint a picture of yourself when you're writing? What do you DO?*

If it's summer, I'm out under that shade tree with that legal pad on my lap, just daydreaming, and whatever comes to me comes to me. I love the sound of language, so from the get-go, I'm trying to make the lines sing and have color and brightness.

I'm often inspired by whatever I've been reading recently. And it's always funny, I'm not aware of it at the moment, but if I go back and look at it a day later, I'll say, "Oh I could tell I was reading Thomas Merton yesterday. Or I'd been reading this adventure novel. Whatever. That influence carries over to me pretty quickly.

All right. Let's have some advice to writers. Let's start with young writers, little kids. We've already said, Listen to stories. Tell stories. What else?

Read. Read and read and read, as much as you can, anything and everything, as often as possible. And if the kid has to read comic books, great! More power to him.

35 *Cynthia Rylant said she read mostly comic books when she was a kid.*

My introduction to the classics was Classics Illustrated, God bless them. I know people raised under different circumstances who had the real classics in their hands, full length, from young ages, and I think that probably is better. But, having said that, the Classics Illustrated didn't mean I wouldn't get to them. It whetted my appetite to get to the real things, I think.

Classics Illustrated were always on a movable stand in the old McClintock's General Store in Union City, Indiana. McClintocks that made homemade potato chips that came in brown paper sacks, and you could see the grease stains on the sacks! And nothing tasted like them. So that, and a Classics Illustrated, and a nickel candy bar, and I was on my way!

36 Thoreau said, if you want to be a writer, go chop wood. And it's still very sound advice, inasmuch as I think, what he means is: Make sure you're living. Don't worry about becoming something called a writer. Worry about living the most engaged, rich, committed life that you can. And then if you want to be a writer, well, you're going to have to read, just like the children. And then you're going to have to write. And write and write and write. And practice that writing. And never be satisfied with it.

And that may involve going to school. It may not, given your disposition. It's going to mean reading all those people who have blazed this path before you, going way back into time. You're going to need to know your Shakespeare. You're going to need to know writers that have written in other cultures than your own. In other languages than your own.

Just like a great ball player. I tell the children, and it's good advice for the adults. You need to know every move you can. The more you would imitate Micheal Jordan, the greater you would be as a basketball player. Would you be a Micheal Jordan? No, no matter how hard you tried, you would never be that person. You would have incorporated his moves into that unique mystery that is yourself.

We take on the best moves. And I think that's what can happen in imitation, which is an old medieval way of studying and learning things. And I think that's good advice.

37 *You live in Wheeling now. And I think you've probably covered a good deal of West Virginia, just going around to grade schools and talking to kids, reading your stories, and so forth, haven't you?*

Oh yes. I have. It's been wonderful: all kinds of out-of-the-way places, inner city schools, and everything inbetween.

And I feel very fortunate to have so much of my life spent with children. I never dreamed that this was what would happen to me when I first started down that road to being a poet. It's funny that poetry was a good training for becoming a children's writer, because in both arts, you have to employ succinctness in your use of language.

I picture you at a WV grade school in the country somewhere, with kids swarming around you. They can't believe you're real.

Yes, that's funny. I'm treated like royalty in so many of these schools I visit. They have a carnation for my collar. They hung banners outside the school, and the hallways and classrooms are just plastered with pictures they've made in response to my books. The teachers will throw a wonderful buffet dinner for me sometimes or else take me out to some exotic restaurant they've found. Or else had a party in the evening for me. It's really quite humbling. And humbling means I should shut up.

I bet you these kids, when they meet you, think, Well, maybe I could write too!

I hope that's what they think. When I tell them background, my life story, I like to think that it's a fairly humble background. We were just farming people in the Midwest, nothing special about us, other than those things that are special to all of us: a loving family that wanted the best for their children.

A loving family that wanted the best for their children. Well, that's richness isn't it?

MH: Yes, indeed, it is richness.

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Davis Grubb

Exerpts from Grubb's writing are in blue italics. Grubb died in 19XX. Luckily, the Library Commission made several recordings of him in the last years of his life. We have quoted from them here, in green italics.

Grubb's biographer, Tom Douglass, speaks about Grubb throughout the program. His remarks are preceded by his initials: TD. When the interviewer's comments are needed for context, they are included in black italics.

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2 *Davis Grubb was raised in Moundsville in a house filled with books - and conversation about books. And he wrote of Moundsville again and again. In his fiction, he called the town Glory.*

TD: " He once said, "Moundsville is every city I've known in a way. "The place means so much to me," he said. "I know it does, because I dream about it every night."

He hated school as a child. And he quit college after one year. No formal writing training. He just had a rare, natural gift with words. And he made a good living as a writer in New York for twenty years.

And during those years, his writing was everywhere. Two of his novels - Night of the Hunter and Fools' Parade - were made into movies. And from the 1940s through the 1970s, he wrote for radio and television. Twilight Zone, Playhouse 57, the Alfred Hitchcock Hour. And when you picked up a magazine like The Saturday Evening Post or Colliers back then, you'd be likely to see the Davis Grubb byline.

3 TD: Davis Grubb had some kind of energy that, when he started writing, he just couldn't stop. Course, there were dry periods inbetween when he wouldn't do anything at all. He'd just be kind of very laid back. But when he started writing, it was a fever that came on him.

And when he wasn't writing ... this man liked to have fun!

TD: Grubb was a large-frame man of 6'2" with a large voice that could take over a room. He was flamboyant and gregarious, ready to spin an anecdote or a joke. He often said, "I tormented myself for years, trying to decide whether life was predestined or freewill. I finally decided it must be predestined to be freewill."

He dressed in costumes: capes and scarves and beads. And sometimes an all-white three-piece suit. Sometimes a sailor outfit. Sometimes baggy pants and an old fedora.

He died in 1980. But you'll hear his voice in this program, thanks to the WV State Library Commission, which videotaped him in 1978 and 79.
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WVLC: The recordings will continue to allow the people of WV to share the ideas of Davis Grubb, our most noted author.
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K: And so they will. Here he is:
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4 *A young writer once came to me years ago and said, "Why write anything? It's all been said." And I said, "Yes, but not by you." And I think unless you believe in the sacred individuality of everyone, then you don't believe in writing at all. Because no metaphor can have any real meaning unless, having originated in the mind of the poet, it finds soil to make its resurrection in the mind of somebody else.*

As I've said in a couple of inscriptions I've written in copies of my books for people throughout the state: When I write a book, I'm sharing my mind with you. When you read a book, you're sharing your mind with me.
>>

"Unless you believe in the sacred individuality of everyone, you don't believe in writing at all ..." Davis' Grubb's mind was something to share. Uncharted territory.

TD: Every day you don't create something is a sin, Grubb told Ron Havern. That's what sin is. Doing nothing. Or traveling along day after day in the same old rut, not feeling anything, not seeing anything. That's a sin.

He never quit joking. Ron Havern was a seminary student who visited Grubb in the hospital when Grubb was dying. Grubb told him to take a seat across the room. "I'm easier to venerate from over there," he said.

Most of his books are set in West Virginia. In fact, his agent told him that his stories that weren't set in West Virginia didn't have the same punch and flavor.

>>>
Davis Grubb: *I never tried to write for everybody. I think all my stories, since they were about West Virginia, were first and foremost for people back here who could look and say... Perhaps - when I was lucky - they could say, "Yes, it was like that in 1928 in Moundsville. That DID happen, or something very like it, in Clarksburg, in 1941..."*
> >

His first book - Night of the Hunter - was partly inspired by a famous Clarksburg murder trial of a vacuum cleaner salesman who killed his mail order brides. That guy became the model for Preacher in <u>*Night of the Hunter*</u>*.*

5 *So let's hear some of his writing. Here's the story: a young father named Ben, who works at a hardware store in the northern panhandle, has robbed a bank and shot two guys. Killed 'em. Ben's in the penitentiary, waiting to be hung. He refuses to tell what he did with the money. His cellmate - who claims to be a preacher - is trying every trick he knows to get Ben to tell where he hid the money. Tom Douglass reading.*

>>>

Ben lay back in the bunk and smiled. Preacher has quit talking now. Preacher just sits there across the cell from Ben with those black eyes boring into him. Preacher is trying to guess. Not the Ben hasn't told Preacher everything that he told the others at the trail, Warden Sticher, Mr. Galumphy, Judge Stathers, and the jury. Everything that is, but the one thing that they wanted the most to know. Ben won't tell that to anybody. But it is a kind of game, teasing Preacher. Ben tells him the story over and over again. And Preacher sits hunched, heeding each word, waiting for the slip that never comes.

"Because I was just plumb tired of being poor. That's the large and small of it. Just sick to death of drawing that little pay envelope at the hardware store in Moundsville every Friday. And then when I'd go over to Mr. Smiley's bank on payday, he'd open that little drawer with all the green tens and fifties and hundreds in it. And every time I'd look at it there, I'd just fairly choke to think of the things it would buy Willa and them kids of mine.

"Greed and lust!"

"Yes, Preacher, it was that. But I reckon it was more too. It wasn't just for me that I wanted it."

"You killed two men, Ben."

"That's right, Preacher. One day, I oiled up that little Smith and Wesson that Mr. Blankensopp keeps in his rolltop desk in the hardware store. And I went up to Mr. Smiley's bank, and I pointed that gun at Mr. Smiley and the teller, Corey South, and I said for Corey to hand me over that big stack of hundred-dollar bills. Lord, you never seen such a wad, Preacher.

"Ten thousand dollars worth, Ben Harper!"

"Then Mr. Smiley said I was crazy, and Corey South went for his gun in the drawer. And with that, I shot him and Mr. Smiley both. And while I was reaching through to get that green stack of bills out of Corey's dead fingers, Mr. Smiley got the gun and lifted up and shot me through the shoulder. Well, sir, I run and got scared and didn't know which way was up or down, before long, and so I got in the car and go home."

"With the money?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

Ben Harper smiles. "Why, they come down the river after me, about four that afternoon. Sheriff Wiley Tomlinson and four policemen."

"And where was you, Ben?"

"Why, I was there, Preacher. You see, I was done running. I was just standing out back by the smokehouse with those two youngsters of mine, John and that little sweetheart, Pearl."

"And the money, Ben? What about that? What about that $10,000?"

Ben smiles again and picks his front teeth with his thumbnail. "Go to hell."

>>

6 K: Where did Davis get the idea for L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E on Preacher's knuckles? In a Clarksburg pool room.
>>
Man came in, plumped his hands down on the bar beside me and said, "Give me a beer." I looked over and I saw LOVE, HATE. I never looked at his face. It was like a blow. It startled me, particularly that left hand, HATE. I never looked at his face. I went in the back with my beer and shot a game of pool with a man named Nick. But I carried that little image of those two hands, LOVE and HATE, in my mind, never knowing where I was going to use it.

This is the way ideas are picked up.
>>

8 *Grubb loved Charles Dickens and his tales of innocent or ordinary people who face down evil. He loved the English poet William Blake, who wrote about struggles between good and evil, in works like "Songs of Innocence and Experience."*

TD: Like Dickens, the master of plot and poetic justice, Grubb liked to hang everything from the plot. All in service of Grubb's broad moral truths that love can defeat evil, that endangered innocence can be protected, that money corrupts absolutely. That sex and love is pure in all its forms. And that justice and redemption can be won in the battle.

Ben never did tell Preacher where he hid the money. But Preacher didn't give up. After he got out of the penitentiary, he found Ben's widow, married her, killed her, then terrorized the two children, who knew that Ben hid the money in the little girl's doll.

9 *Here, Preacher is chasing the kids through the night with that knife. Little John, the hero of the book, is pulling his little sister Pearl down to the riverbank, desperate to reach his dad's old rowboat. It's their only chance to get away. West Virginia writer, Ann Pancake, reads:*

John is scrambling down the bank, pulling Pearl behind him knowing Preacher is close behind with his knife.

>>
His feet slipped and sucked in the mud, and the weeds tore at his legs as he led her stumbling on toward the boat, but Preacher had heard them and now his sweet , tenor voice called after them.

John said, "Hurry, Pearl! Oh Godamighty, please hurry, Pearl!"

"You said a cuss word, John. That's a sin."

He thought desperately, staring into a great patch of mists: Maybe the skiff is gone. Maybe one of them shantyboat trash borrowed it tonight.

"John, where -"

"Hush! Hush! Hurry, Pearl!

Then he spied it, the bow jutting sharply in the blanketing white, and Pearl, yawning now in a perfect picture of a child bored with a stupid game, hugged the doll, Jenny and fought her way wearily through the ooze to the skiff.

"Children! Children!

They could hear him above them, thrashing down through the high brush filth, fighting his way toward them.

Get in the skiff, Pearl! Oh Godamighty, hurry!

Children!

John! she cried out, pausing. That's Daddy, calling us!

He uttered a sob of despair and thrust her brutally over the skff side and down among the bait cans and fish heads in the bottom. Now they heard Preacher hacking at a vine that had entangled him. John knew well what it was he hacked with, and in an instant, he was free again, thrashing down through the brush, not ten feet away. But they were in the boat now and John's hand grappled for the oar the way poor old Uncle Birdie had shown him that day, and the way he had watched men do it since the first time he had seen the river. But they moved not an inch in the muck, so tightly was the skiff grounded.

Ah, my lambs! So there you are!

John thrust and strained against the oar until the flesh of his hands tore under the wood's ragged grain and the boat moved, and he bore down again, straining with every ounce of flesh and bone, and it moved again. But now Preacher had cleared the brush filth and was stepping swiftly through the mud *toward them. John gave a final thrust that nigh burst his heart and the skiff swung suddenly into the gentle current.*

Wait! Wait, you little bastards! Wait! Wait! WAIT! Damn you to hell!

Even in that faint show of moonlight, even with the mists wisping and curling against the land, they could see the livid, twisted, raging oval of his face: the mouth gaping and sick with hatred. Now he wallowed rapidly toward them through the shallows, the bright, open blade sinking in his fist, and then he staggered and slipped and fell, floundering in the water for a moment and then rising again, splashed after them.

John bore back on the oar in the lock, and the blade skimmed the water ineffectually, and he thought: Why can't I do it when I know how to do it! Please, let me do it! Please! And he bore back again, and the oar blade bit hard into the stream, and the boat swung erratically like a leaf.

Wait! Wait! WAIT! Damn you to hell!

And now some errant current in the vast, dark river caught them upon its warm wing and the boat began moving, blessedly moving, spinning at first like a mad October leaf and then heading into the channel while still they could hear Preacher: every sound drifting clean and sharp across the flat water: He was back on shore now where he could follow better, clawing his way down the brush filth through sumac and pokeberry, cursing and shouting amid that wiry jungle of the river shore, but now they were moving beyond him,. They were free.
>>>

And the river carried them to safety. The Ohio River, one of Grubb's great symbols.

10 In 1961, a Time Magazine critic wrote of Davis Grubb, "So few have the same power to conjure up the forces of darkness." Well, Grubb had another perspective on that. "I believe in dark because it shows off light," he wrote. He saw the world as a dangerous place filled with, as Preacher said, "Hate and Love - warring one against the other from the womb to the grave."

TD: Davis Grubb comes from a tradition that believes that in all of us, there is some good and evil, and there are moments of good that transcend the bad that we do. A belief in love, redemptive love. A belief in fighting injustice and actually winning.

West Virginia novelist, Denise Giardina.

Denise: I read Night of the Hunter and was just blown away by it. On one level, it's this classic noire thriller. But on another level, it's this incredibly beautiful story about these children and their search for love. And finally finding it.

11 In *Night of the Hunter*, a rugged country woman, Rachel Cooper, took the desperate children in. She protected them when Preacher came looking for them. And she was modeled on a Harrison County woman, Rachel Cutcher, who took in homeless children.

And here, after the danger has passed, it's Christmas Day and Davis - in classic Dickens style - is delivering his message through Rachel.

>>
Rachel reflected about children. One would think that the world might be ashamed to name such a day for one of them, and then go on the same old way. Children running the lanes, lost sheep crying in the wind while the shepherd drank and feasted in the tavern, with never an ear to heed their small lament. Lord save little children. Because with every child ever born of woman's womb, there is a time of running through a shadowed place, an alley with no doors and a hunter whose footsteps ring brightly along the bricks behind him.

With every child, rich or poor, however favored, however warm and safe the nursery, there is this time of echoing and vast aloneness, when there is no one to come nor to hear, and dry leaves scurrying past on a street become the rustle of dread. And the ticking of the old house is the cocking of the hunter's gun. For even when the older ones love and care and are troubled for the small ones, there is little they can do when the look into the grave and stricken eyes that are windows to this affrighted nursery province beyond all succor, all comforting.

To Rachel, the most dreadful and moving thing of all was the humbling grace with which these small ones accept their lot. Lord save little children! They would weep at a broken toy, but stand with the courage of a burning saint before the murder of a mother and the fact that perhaps there had never been a father at all. The death of a kitten would send them screaming to the handiest female lap. And yet, when the time came that they were no longer welcome in a house, they would gather their things together in old paper cartons, tied with a length of clothesline and wander forth to seek another street, another house, another door.

Lord save little children. They abide. The wind blows, and the rain is cold. Yet they abide.

And in the shadow of a branch beneath the moon, a child sees a tiger, and the old ones say, There is no tiger! Go to sleep. And when they sleep, it is a tiger's sleep and a tiger's night. And a tiger's breathing at the midnight pain. Lord, save little children. For each of them has his preacher to hound them down the dark river of fear and tonguelessness, and never a door. Each one is mute and alone, because there is no word for a child's fear and no ear to heed it if there were a word. And no one to understand it if it heard.

Lord, save little children. They abide. And they endure.
>>

Denise: And I always have trouble reading that without crying. First time I read that aloud was in a class of West Virginia literature I was teaching at West Virginia State. And I read this passage as an example of how beautiful Davis Grubb's writing is. And I just started bawling like a baby. And I still do. Every time I read it, it never fails to choke me up.

I think it came from somewhere deep inside him too. It had to have.

Denise: Oh, I think so. This is the child in Davis Grubb crying. And hurting. And asking for love. So maybe that's one reason it's very sad. But I think it also is something that touches all of us on this very deep level.

12 *That is a pattern in Davis Grubb's fiction.*

TD: Mainly, this sense of powerlessness comes from when his father died at 16, and when he had to leave the house, 318, when he was just 13 years old. That, I think, was a traumatic event for him.

Davis Grubb's own story would make good material for a Davis Grubb novel. When Davis was thirteen, the bank evicted his family from his beloved boyhood home a week before Christmas, during the Depression. His father died shortly thereafter. His mom had never held a job outside the home, but she had to support her two boys. In Grubb's Senior year in high school, she moved her two boys to Clarksburg, to take a job as a protective service worker.

There, Davis met Rachel Cutcher, who impressed him deeply. And he surely heard many stories about the abused, abandoned, and neglected children who became part of his mom's daily life.

After he finished high school, he wrote drama scripts for a Clarksburg radio station, WBJK. Then he moved to New York, got a janitor job to support himself, and by 1955, he was a well-known writer. And he became friends with writers and musicians like John Steinbeck and Miles Davis, who, by the way, once dedicated a tune to Grubb, called Blues for Rachel - after Rachel Cutcher died.

13 TD: And in the mid-fifties, late fifties, he hobnobbed with all the famous writers of New York. He went down to PJ Clark's, which is a bar on 53rd Street, I believe. And he took his little dog, Rowdy Charlie, with him. they'd sit on the barstood there, and there he met people like Robert Mitchum and William Styron. Norman Mailer, who he didn't get along with very well. But writers of the times. James Jones. And he became friends with them. He became friends with people like Ruth Gordon and Mort Saul and Lenny Bruce.

He told them all about West Virginia.

Davis Grubb: *I became almost tiresome in certain New York quarters with my harping on what I think are the unique splendors, horrors, and great humors of our state.*

TD: I think Davis Grubb would have been very happy to have lived his whole life in Moundsville, in Glory. But circumstances evicted him from that place. And he never got over that eviction. And in a way, he's always been trying to recover that place.

On the other hand, he was someone who had to kind of tone down his curiosity, his intellectual ways, so he could just survive. And New York City, for him, was a place where he didn't have to worry about measuring up to anything other than what he wanted to do as a writer.

14 *Here's Davis himself in 1979, standing in front of his childhood home in Moundsville, in his beads and slouch hat. The highway is nearby, so you'll hear the traffic.*

>>>
DG: *Everything I remember, every book I've ever written, had its origins some way in this piece of land. Night of the Hunter, Voices of Glory.*

Trucks are roaring along the interstate now, which has penetrated my part of Moundsville like a cruel arrow, burning down and destroying landmarks which, for me, were as familiar as this grass or that pavement.

318 Seventh Street. I don't think any number in my life could ever have any more meaning that that, that address.

Don't ever underestimate the value, the real estate value of the human imagination. I can change this landscape in my mind into words on paper, and I make a pretty good living at it, and I get a great feeling from it too.

The real estate in my mind, the Moundsville in my mind, can never be penetrated by any interstate. The landmarks cannot be demolished, the real estate cannot be bartered or sold. Or prostituted in any way.
>>>

The eviction of his family from that house - and his dad's death - was the start of his great, lifelong anger at uncaring institutions...

>>>
Davis Grubb: We lost this house, like many Americans did, like many people all over the world did during the Depression. I remember a curious circumstance in which a once-esteemed and prominent banker in this town evicted us from this house. Came up the steps with the eviction notice. And my dog Rags bit him. And we were terribly concerned, because we thought we were going to lose him, and he was a lovely dog. And we were very glad when he made a gradual recovery.
>>>

15 *He made terrible grades in school and was always getting in trouble of one kind of another. His grade school principal said, "I never knew anybody to come in with as many bloody noses as Davis Grubb." Yet Grubb already knew he was going to be a writer.*

>>
Davis Grubb: I can't remember when it first was that I said to myself, when I looked in a mirror over the washbasin, which was about to here on me, "You are a writer." I can't imagine ever not having been a writer. I wasn't a prodigy in any sense. I was, to all intents and purposes, a very stupid, mischievous, rather sad child. I made horrible grades in school, the worst, to the disappointment of my father and mother both. I'd come home with my report card just bristling with Fs or Ds.
>>

Sometimes it looked like a comb, he said, there were so many F's on it.

The Depression itself influenced his writing. His family went broke before they lost the house. His dad was an architect, and there wasn't much call for architects during the Depression.

>>>

Davis Grubb: I know that, in an attempt to save on fuel, we would seal off rooms in this house and not heat them. And live in less and less space as the Depression darkened and deepened, until at last, we were living in our kitchen, our bedroom, our bathroom, and one room down here, this room I'm looking at now.

>>>

16 *And every day, he saw two of his other great influences: the penitentiary and the Adena Indian Mound that both dominate Moundsville.*

TD: From every approach to the school steps, you could see the silhouette of the prison in the early sunlight. And from the Strand Theater, which was Davis' favorite place to hang out, you could see the penitentiary in the distance.

And the penitentiary is a Gothic structure. It looks like a castle. And it's colored gray and black from age. It's really a forboding thing. It sits right in the middle of a residential district. And you have these nice houses with flowers and everything's well-kept. And not twenty feet away from these yards rises the penitentiary, looming over the town.

The Watchman, published in 1961, follows a guard at a penitentiary and contains many details that Davis soaked up from Moundsville life. The lights in the town dim when a man was being executed in the electric chair, for instance.

TD: He says it was one of the bigger influences on his imagination, that penitentiary, and the Indian mound, which is the tallest structure in the whole town. It rises above everything else. From the top of the mound, you can see the Ohio River. You can see the penitentiary. You could see his house and all the places where he played.

And little Davis soaked all this in. As he wrote:

>>

"In the innocence and confusion of my child's brain, the great mound and the penitentiary were bound together in ambiguous and dreadful brotherhood. One was the burial place of the unknown dead, the other of the unknown living."

>>>

17 *In 1962, Grubb published The Voices of Glory. Each short chapter is a voice of a different resident of Glory in the early 1900s. Several events have left the town in a boiling stew of prejudices of all kinds: religious, social, sexual prejudice against immigrants. Here comes a sample …*

18 *Here's Anton Jakob Heller, who died after an explosion in a coal mine. Read by Kirk Judd.*

>>>

Look for my name among those graven on the stones on Glory Hill. You will not find it. My eternal home is in the earth. Deep, deep, deep within the earth. I am too deep even to feed the grass. I listen in the nights to the eternal rustle and the creak of rippling rock seams old as earth itself. Sometimes I think I even feel the heat at the molten stone at the world's center and its core.

There is purity down here. Nothing decays. I lie beside the four who died with me, four hundred feet beneath the Benwood tipple. We share a little room carved out of coal. The other nineteen miners died in the blast. We five were cut off in a little room at the end of the corridor. No fire touched us. We didn't even hear the explosion.

We knew when it happened though. A silent blast of air raced swiftly past us, then came sucking back, and instantly, our safety lamps went out. The rats screamed in the blackness. Some men cried. A mine mule bucked iand whinnied n the dark.

I was afraid for awhile, like every other living thing within that breathless stigeon corridor. But after awhile, I sat down against a wagon, opened my lunch pail and began to eat the food my wife had fixed the night before. Four hundred feet above me, sirens wailed and ambulances came clanging from every town, all the way from Glory up to Wheeling. I didn't hear them though. I didn't care. I didn't scream and fight and break my fingernails against the six million tons of coal and slate and earth that lay between me and the Benwood sun. I felt ashamed for some of the men who did. I thought, What's the sense of all that? Death must come for all someday, some way. And this way seems so clean. Here in this dry, black room that we had carved out of the boweled, bituminous black darkness of the earth.

I ate my lunch, I finished every crumb. The company officials argued among themselves, four hundred feet above. Some among them said there was a chance that one or two men had survived down there. But the mine was burning. And mine is property. And the only way to quench a burning mine is to seal it airtight...

At last. the company men agreed: the chance of any of us living was slim. So at last, they sealed it at the mouth. The fire was over soon. And so were we.
>>>

Davis Grubb had an amazing ability to put himself in somebody else's place. You never knew what he was going to write, just as you never knew what costume he would wear the next day. After his smash success with Night of the Hunter, people expected him to write another scary morality tale. Instead, he wrote a Civil War novel - A Dream of Kings - about a boy who grows up and fights with Stonewall Jackson in the Civil War.

TD: It's an historical novel, but it's also a coming-of-age novel about Tom Christopher, who is an orphan, like Davis was. Who is searching for the lost father. And there's another character who is searching for her father. So there's a lot of father-searching in Davis Grubb's books, a biographical theme of Davis' own life.

19 *Grubb's grandfather was a steamboat pilot on the Ohio. Grubb probably had fun picturing himself as Tom, playing on a wrecked steamboat with his friend, Cathy. She's at the wheel, pretending to be the pilot. Tom's wading ahead of the boat, pretending to be the leadsman in a rowboat, measuring the depth of the channel ahead of the steamboat., so it won't run aground.*

>>
Wading there, waist-deep in the shoals beyond the Nellie Queen's bow, now rank and green and green-glistening with sumac and creepers, and squinting my eyes till my lashes blurred the light of day and conjured it into a fog, the swirling mists of night, and I, the black leadsman, held the boat's safety in my fingers' cunning.

In my imagined skiff, I would make my way cautiously to a distance of 12 feet off her starboard bow and hearing in my dreaming heart, the ghostly crank of my fog-shrouded oars, while I dandled my leadline in the treacherous depths.

It was a glory, but it was a solomn doing. We were never closer to our gods then then. It was not playing. It was ritual and salvation and a praying time. "Half twain!" And I would hear her shrill voice chant out response and would wade on, heaving my lead line cautiously. "Quarter less taree!" I would sing ...
>>

See how different the language is from Night of the Hunter? Grubb not only varied his subject matter, he varied his writing style. Dramatically. Critics acknowledged the beauty of his writing and images in Dream of Kings, but criticized the book because it wasn't another Night of the Hunter. Grubb wrote, "They seem to get very upset when you don't write the same thing." But that didn't stop him. He went on to write a Gothic novel, a child's fantasy book, and Shadow of My Brother, a social consciousness novel about three generations of a white racist family.

TD: He thought that no book should be like any other. He didn't buy into this "I have to write a formula book." Or "I have to find a formula, then follow it because it was successful the first time."

20 *His novel, Fools Parade, combines several genres into a spine-chilling chase through the Marshall County countryside. In 1969, Time Magazine called it "a marvelous soft of flapdoodle that does not fit into any category that book jacket haiku-ists can think of ... A fine book written for the hell of it, which is a splendid reason."*

Here's the opening scene. Three convicts are getting out of Glory penitentiary. They're waiting at the train station with Doc Council, the corrupt head guard, who is as fine a villain as you could wish for. Doc is taking full advantage of the chance to torture them one more time.

Read by Tom Douglass:
>>
"*It was a late afternoon of savage bottomlands, heat in the April of 1935. Johnny Jesus stood between his two companions, leaning back against the high baggage wagon on the warped bricks of the depot landing and facing the big moonfaced gunman.*

The sun stood halfway down the west side of the Ohio River, which lay blazing like a ditch of diamonds beyond the old stooped willows of its shore To the east stood the town of Glory, West Virginia. And beyond it, the violet, orchard-fringed ridges rose humpbacked and shimmering.

No wind stirred. Yet, from time to time, like the hide of a field horse beneath the cloud of stinging flies, the Appalachian light seemed to twitch.

Five eyes watched the Uncle Doc' Council's fat forefinger dig a 98-cent watch out of his stomach and hold it up on a braided leather thong to check its time against the scrolled hands above the stationmaster's quartered window. Uncle Doc's amiable round face turned to look at the three of them again, and the light on the lenses of his spectacles flashed like army heliographs. When he spoke, his words were distinct. But the voice was soft as the sound of mud-daubers up against the jigsaw shadows of the lichen-stained depot walls.

Like an animal trainer, Uncle Doc had cultivated that voice through his years as Captain of Guards at the state prison. "Now then, each one of you has got him a brand new state free suit and a state free hat and a state free pair of shoes. I mean, those are gratis gifts from the state of West Virginia."

Uncle Doc was one of those humped, huge men who, beneath a cloak of paunch, are cat-swift as dainty dancers and hard as a sack of salt. He wore his loose, pokey suit of slate grey alpaca with the sleeves rolled up halfway up the freckled beef of his hairless forearms, arms which seemed not to have wrists at all, and his hands are the kind which still seem like fists even when the fingers are opened.

"Reach in the right-hand coat pocket, and you'll find a brand new five dollar bill. Reach in the left, and you'll find seven cents car fare. Besides them, gratis gifts from the state, each man of you has got a state-free B and O coach ticket in his hip pocket..".
>>>

Violence just below the surface. The prison authorities and the local banker have put some fine print onto Matty's check that says the check can be cashed only at the Bank of Glory. But Matty isn't allowed to come back to Glory. Plus, they stole his money years ago.

22 *Here's one more paragraph about Doc Council. Notice how Grubb describes him.*
>>
"Whenever Uncle Doc Council moved, it was as though, deep within his vastness, the bones stirred first, catching up the meat of him on their way, and then, last of all, his outside covering. Yet sometimes it seemed only the bones moved, secretly, slightly, leaving the surface of him unstirred, like a movement in the deeps of thick, dark drapes. Thus he moved now, yet the only hint on that tensing was the sunlight caught and dazzled once like the dog star in the dark of the pump gun's breach.

"Well, Glory's back yonder, kid," Uncle Doc said. And for the first time that day, he smiled. "Why don't you go home, boy?"
>>

Doc would love to shoot Johnny if he tried to do anything other than get on that train. Johnny knows it.

26 *Ancient Lights was his last book, once again something entirely different, a futuristic fantasy. Grubb refused chemotherapy treatments to finish it.*

Grubb's frend Merle Moore: Davis always said writing a book, once you get the idea and start it, is like having a baby. You've got to finish it.

Merle Moore says she sometimes wonders about the way it worked out, for Davis to spent his last two years in West Virginia. Davis might say it was predestined to be freewill. In his last days, a hospital visitor wrote down something he said. It seems fitting for Merle Moore to read it.

Merle Moore reading*: "I'm a lucky man, a very lucky man. I've been allowed to finish my book. One thing I can say is that I have worked. I have created something. I haven't hid my light under a bushel. I've lived, and I've seen, and I've expressed what I've seen as best I could. (I've known) so many wonderful things and known so many people. But I don't regret that it's past. I don't regret that it's over, because it's not over really. It's past. You know, you can make a moment live forever in the imagination. That's part of what being a writer is all about. That's part of the reward."*

Mary Lee Settle

2 *Did you realize that you are an inspiration to a lot of younger WV writers who see themselves as following in your footsteps?*

Well, that's wonderful. Just tell them to work very hard. And tell them it's mighty hard work for mighty low pay. And I'm proud of them. (laughing)

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

3 *... She never* <u>*did*</u> *graduate from college, but 5 colleges have given her honorary doctorates.*

I never went back to college. I just started learning instead. There wasn't any reason to go - I went to war instead of going to college.

Later, after stints as a journalist and an actress, she became an internationally known writer, author of 18 books, novels and non-fiction. In her eighties, she's still outspoken.

Beware of anybody who thinks they're absolutely right. Because they're damn dangerous. I sometimes think the greatest gift of God is doubt and questioning.

And every year, she falls more deeply in love.

4 I have, as a result of all this work, literally fallen in love with democracy. But democracy is not me against you. Democracy is the balance between us. And there's another way of saying it: Voltaire: "I disagree with you, sir, but I defend to the death your right to say it."

She was born into a Kanawha County family of considerable social position and means. But in her writing and life, she has always spoken up for equality and resented exclusion and privilege.

The choice is completely individual and always has been.

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5 *Mary Lee is best known for her historical fiction. And when she talks about her writing, the subject of freedom of speech - the freedom to disagree - comes up quickly.*

You know, why can we sit here and talk now without somebody looking over our shoulder? I've lived in countries where people are talking to me, and suddenly they want to tell me something, and they glance over their shoulder to see if there's a policeman or a listener. We don't have that. We <u>*have*</u> had it.

6 *She fears people are forgetting their own history, and so forgetting what it's like to live without that freedom. She began a New York Times article with the question: "What is it that provokes us into attempting to write fiction set deep in the past?"*

I think we're trying to find out about the present, mostly.

That same thought - stated another way - turns up in the first line of her autobiography, Addie.

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7 *An autobiography that begins with one's birth begins too late, in the middle of the story, sometimes at the end ...*

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"An autobiography that begins with one's birth begins too late." It's one of Mary Lee's main themes. Go to the past to find out about the present.

15 *Mary Lee's literary biographer, Brian Rosenberg, writes of her - quote - "virtual obsession with truth, the effort to empathize and uncover connections." And she researched her grandmother's life with the same energy she applied to the Civil War...*

I went through all the divorce papers, lawsuits, everything I needed to trace a coal-mining past...

She aims to tell history from the ground level point of view of people not named in history, cooks, foot soldiers, mothers ...

16 Recorded history is wrong. It's wrong because the voiceless have no voice in it. it becomes official history. I thought in terms of writing good, honest history. And to give those, um, you know … When they say one and three quarters arrived on such-and-such a day as indentured servants to Virginia in 1774, I gave them a name! And a world that they did come from. And a place that they did go. And what happened to them. I simply tried to put a human face on American history.

And on West Virginia history! Mary Lee Settle has written books set in many places. Her National Book Award-winning book, Blood Ties, was set in Turkey. But in this show, we'll concentrate on novels that trace the ups and downs of democracy in her home state.

Our history has been censored. And I didn't like that.

So she wrote a series of five novels, the Beulah Quintet. Southern Quarterly called them "a downright awesome achievement." Through five novels, she follows several families who left England in the 1700s, looking for freedom. They settled in the Kanawha Valley of what's now West Virginia.

You know what I'm going to do when I finish the book I'm working on now? I'm going to, for the first time, read the Beulah Quintet. They're pretty good!

Read it all the way through, one after the other?

Absolutely. All as one book.

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In the first novel, the characters risk their lives to rebel against the King, who could - and did - throw anyone in jail - or kill them - for saying the wrong thing, refusing to follow the official religion, whatever. The families leave England and make their way to the Kanawha Valley, which Mary Lee calls Beulah. Their children and *great-grandchildren go through frontier times, the Civil War, the mine wars, and the last novel is set in the Vietnam War.*

17 *The Beulah Quintet started with a single image that popped into Mary Lee's mind in 1954.*

It certainly did. I had a vision. Of course, vision sounds so spooky like angels and stuff. But I tend to get a visual sense which is sensuous and which will start me actually writing. And I saw, in my mind's eye, two men in a drunk tank on a Saturday night. And one man hits the other.

The two men didn't know each other. The punch surprised them both. And the original image was so vivid in Mary Lee's mind that, as a writer, she just kept thinking and thinking about it.

It was going to be another modern novel. But then I kept wondering why the man hit that man instead of that man. It was Saturday night, and the drunk tank was full. What was behind the fist? What were the prejudices, what was the training in hatred? And in distrust?

You know, it's always called a West Virginia novel, but that's what I realized was wrong. I hadn't done my detective work about who we were. These people have a past, whoever they are. And I kept going back and back and back and back and back.

It was like following a river upriver, and into a creek, and into a rill, and where it starts.

The guy who punched the other turns out to be an unemployed coal miner who'd gotten drunk in despair. The guy he punched was a grandson of a US Senator who'd gotten drunk at the country club.

Neither man knew it, but their ancestors had fought together in England to overthrow the King before they came to America.

That's right. And they were blood kin to each other

But - once they got to America, their kinship gradually got lost, in more than one way.

Because the land that had once been frontier, and where there was this seed of equality in the frontier settlement, grew into who had money and who didn't, what farm became master, what farm became servant. And the social split had happened in the valley.

18 *Mary Lee found a letter in the Kanawha County library that pointed her back into the English past. The letter was written by two English soldiers in Oliver Cromwell's army, which had defeated the King. They were writing for their regiment.*

A regiment of soldiers had revolted against Cromwell and had written a wonderful letter...It was a letter to Cromwell. And it said, "What have we to do in Ireland, to fight and murder a people who have done us no harm. We have waded too deeply in human blood."

Cromwell had ordered these guys to attack Ireland. They didn't want to. They had signed up to help overthrow the King and tyranny, and they felt it was tyranny to attack Ireland.

And that set me off, and I thought, well, maybe, maybe, maybe I'll begin to find my answer here.

She was finding clues, solving a mystery. Mary Lee saw that letter and thought: Yep. Ancestors of those two guys in the drunk tank. She started researching.

19 *In England, she stumbled onto the actual place where the two men who wrote that letter were shot by Cromwell's firing squad. She found it when she wasn't looking for it.*

I went to Burford just for the weekend. And I walked into the churchyard. And literally, I turned left, away from the church and toward the wall of Coxwall stone. And there, on the wall, I saw a line of shots.There was a high line of shots and a low line of shots.

And I climbed up and put my fingers in the holes. And it just at that point, I heard a voice behind me saying, "What the devil are you doing up there?" And I turned around, and it was the lovely old Christian vicar. And I still had my fingers in the bullet holes. And I said, "Who got shot here?" And he said, "Damn rebels! Damn rebels should have been shot!"

It had been three hundred years ago. I had found Johnny Church and Thankful, the two people shot by Cromwell for being the agitators of the regiment, Waley's regiment, that refused to fight in Ireland.

Did they begin to form in your mind? To take shape?

Yeah, they jumped into my mind. They didn't begin to form. They just were there.

20 *Was it really just luck you found that cemetery?*

I was living in England, and I was on my way back to this country to teach a fall term and decided that I would have a little time in the country and picked a place called Burford. You know, which seemed a nice, I don't know Burford, and it seemed a nice place in the cosmos.

I would say, over and over, during the years of *The Beulah Quintet* and *I, Roger Williams*, I have been led like this. And literally, I can't call it anything else. Because I picked Burford instead of another place. I really think sometimes it's looking for me.

Mary Lee decided young Jonathan Church would be the ancestor of the guy who punched the other in the drunk tank.

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26 *Cromwell changed after he got power, as leaders sometimes do. And four years later, Johnny was carrying the message to Cromwell from his regiment. When Cromwell found out what kind of message Johnny and Thankful were carrying, he had them arrested. He wasn't interested in reasoning. Instead, he demanded that they betray and denounce their comrades, and when they wouldn't do it, he had a firing squad shoot them in the churchyard. Here is Johnny Church's execution scene:*
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27 *He walks out of the church and to the church yard wall. And here he is -*

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Oh Christ, I pray thee control my body so I can walk out of that door as Thankful. It is too late for other prayer. The sun is blinding for a minute. Let me see. My God. Someone speak a word. Hast forgot how to say NO? Will noone cry CEASE? Will no one look at me?

There they are, ranged along the church leads above me, as far as the eye can see. And over them, the spire is riding the air, as it will do when I am gone from here. And promise peace to other men.

I hear a man clear his throat. I did not hear the drums start. Somebody is sobbing. Most of them have clasped their hands and pray me to the heaven I leave behind me. Will no one look at me so I am not alone? I must walk carefully across the grass, for it is slippery with blood and dew. I turn. I face the spire now.

Why is that cow lowing? It is too early to milk. She must be in calf. This doublet is too heavy for the shot. I must take it off and spread my arms so that the shot will find true. Those who are ranked there before me look through and past me. Are my eyes a tawny color or brown? I think an autumn color, as my hair. I can feel the wind under my shirt and the muscles of my chest. I think they wait for me to speak. Are there expectations even in this?

This is so good an earth. I am touched by the sun and warmed. The grass is wet against my legs. What can I say who have said so much? Shoot true, and God forgive us for what we do to one another. Thankful has said it all. You are unwise. There are no words. I am empty.

I stretch out my arms. I step forward.
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A perfect example of the weave of historic fact and fiction.

And Johnny was a human being called Jonathan Church. And Thankful was called Corporal Perkins. Corporal Perkins and Corporal Church are the two who were shot at Burford.

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28 *You're after the roots of democracy.*

Well, I certainly am.

I don't think we realize in this country how truly rare the history of our democracy truly is. It started in the frontier, but it started with ideas that were brought over here. And those ideas, over and over, we have tried to squash. We have fought against them. We have tried to form autocracies, as was formed in every state in the South, before the Civil War.

Autocracy, where a few people decide what happens to everyone.

We survived it. We survived the twenties, when there were attempts to blot out opposition. We survived the early fifties, when the McCarthy hearings were attempting to blot out opposition.

In that case, they called people Communist.
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Watch anybody who is calling something they don't agree with by the wrong name. Because you find all the way through American history that those who are autocrats tend to use the wrong name for those who disagree.

29 *The New York Times said Mary Lee's historical novels are "head and shoulders" above others in authentic detail. She works at it. When she was writing Oh Beulah Land, set in the mountain frontier, for instance, she spent months reading only things written before or during frontier times, to fill her mind with the language, the details of daily life.*

I wanted to find out what had actually happened. And also, I wanted to find out what people at the time thought was happening. We know the results, because we are in their future. But at the time, they didn't know their future.

She found plenty of writing by ordinary people in the British Museum in London.

Because we were them in those days. And there were many contemporary books - not novels - contemporary histories - written by people who came back to England ...

30 I read for ten months. And then one night, I had a dream. I dreamed that I was a man, and that I was in dirty buckskins, that I was building a hut, and I had some land, and I had girdled some trees. He was doing it because the law said that you had to have a dwelling that was at least four feet high in order to vote as a landowner.

And the next morning, I realized I was ready to write the book.

You had read so much that this language and this time had crept into your dreams.

I was waiting for it, and it happened.

31 *Another Mary Lee research tale: She convinced a British Museum curator to let her forage around in the basement archives, full of relics and strange items from the American frontier.*

And he just let me wander around.

She opened a big chest.

And it was full of these rather beautiful - um, Indian leather, stretched on a circle of twigs. And the leather was stretched on it and dried. And then there were these Indian signs on it, which were very beautiful. And I just thought, well, these are some little things they hung on the wall, you know.

I picked the first one up. And a hank of yellow hair fell all the way to the floor. That tea chest was full of scalps. And this taught me more than anything else about what was happening in the frontier.

The British had cut deals with the Indians to fight the settlers in the War of 1812. Those scalps came from the Kentucky frontier.

So I didn't know if it was one of my own ancestors I was holding up with that yellow hair. Although we're all redheads and brown hair in the family.

But it was just full of scalps, and this letter I found from a British officer, sending the scalps to England because they were a present from the Indians to the Great White Father, blah blah blah in London, saying exactly what they were. And in good military fashion, so many women, so-and-so many babies,-so-and-so many children, so-and-so many men, killed with ax, burned, so on.

32 Here's a reading from Oh Beulah Land. It's the early 1800s, in *Oh Beulah Land*. Mary Lee's character, Hannah Bridewell - ancestor of a character in Prisons - was captured by Indians. She escapes. As she thrashes through the underbrush, trying to get home, she's caught in a big thunderstorm.

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ML: *She managed to get uphill to a huge tree trunk and was pinned against it, hurt and howling to be let loose by the lashing wind, not knowing in the wild whooping air that she made any sound at all. How long it lasted, she did not know. She was aware and left exhausted by it when at last, it calmed to a steady rain, leaving the mountainside a watershed littered with treacherous dead branches.*

Long after dark, she found a rock ledge that had protected the leaves below from the rain and crawled under it exhausted. She woke, hearing the rain in the pitch darkness of night, hearing more heavy breathing by her leaf bed, which she had banked high in the luxury of finding such a good place to rest.

The smell which permeated the cave was not the fetid smell of bear, but the musty smell of a great cat. She saw no eyes shining and realized that the beast had not yet found her. Then almost at once, she knew that the breathing was beyond breathing, had slipped over to being the satisfied purr of a cat in dry comfort and that as long as the noise went on, she was safe.

The presence of the animal was taking the chill off the rain-laden air. And stiff with fright as she was, she began to drowse. Her body was battered too much by the long storm and the falling on the wet slopes (start again at "The presence of the animal..."
to let her stay completely awake. But she woke frozen when she felt movement, felt the great, living, damp, soft pelt beside her and knew that whatever beast it was, tired to death too, had crept close to her for her poor, pathetic warmth and still purred, drifting to sleep, meaning no harm.

In the first glimmer of dawn, she saw it pause at the cave's mouth, look back once at her with eyes as grey as stones and pick its way gently into the morning on light, buff feet, disappearing even as she became conscious. It was a huge, tawny cat that faded into the dawn like part of a dream.
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33 *Mary Lee didn't have much firsthand experience with mountain lions. So she went to the London Zoo and positioned herself in front of the puma cage.*

And I sat there, and the puma and I communicated with each other for hour after hour. Then I knew about the puma.

She also had to write a sequence in which a starving Hannah cuts meat from a dead bear.

I knew all about bears intellectually at this point. But frankly, I had never felt a bear like Hannah did.

So she asked the bearkeeper if she could feel a bear.

And he said, "come up on Saturday morning, and I will let you in with the American brown bears," he said. "They're very nice. They're young. Wear several layers of heavy clothing. And get yourself two cans - of golden syrup. “And go in with them open, and the bears will play with you and put their long tongues into the syrup, and you’ll have a fine time.”

Well, all right, anything for research. So I went up there. And fortunately, there was nobody at that end of the zoo. So I went in, and sure enough, the bears were delighted with me. They thought I was another bear. So I held out the syrup, and their tongues are incredibly long, and they went aaaah, and we all had a good time. And they’d punch at me, and I’d punch at them, and we all punched at each other. We just played. Because I needed to feel that sort of toilet brush bear skin.

And suddenly I heard a noise. And I looked up, and there must have been a hundred people watching this performance from the top. So I got out of there. That was the end of that. The bear keeper was just delighted. And he said, “You know, I’m so sorry. I would have put you in with the Kodiac. She’s fifteen feet high. Her name is Daisy. But she’s in heat, and this morning, she killed another bear. But by next week, she won’t be in heat, and if you’ll come back, I’ll let you in the cage with Daisy. (laughing) I haven’t been back since. That’s been forty years ago.

Did you go home straightway and write that scene then?

No, I just let it happen in my head, became Hannah.

34 *Mary Lee set her third book of the Beulah Quintet, Know Nothing, during the Civil War years.*

And what I was concerned with, in *Know Nothing*, was what caused people who had been frontier people, maybe one or two generations before, to turn into reactive, slave-owning southerners. What caused their reaction, their vigilante-mindedness?

And so it went. She traced changes in values and behavior of these Kanawha Valley families through the years, to the night when the descendent of one family punches the descendent of another in that drunk tank.

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35 *One more behind-the-scenes research story. Mary Lee Settle’s novel Scapegoat is set during the mine wars. Mother Jones, the union organizer, is a character. Mary Lee remembered that, thirty years before, when she was digging around for something else, she’d come across some of Mother Jones speeches...*

For years everyone said there are no speeches of Mother Jones, and there they were. There were 5 speeches of Mother Jones, and they were taken down by a legal stenographer, who had been sent there by Brown, Johnson and Knight to get some evidence to have her arrested for sedition.

I was just delighted with it because it had real language in it. It didn’t have cleaned-up, genteel, governess, English class language. It was taken down verbatim and published verbatim.

So Mary Lee transcribed those speeches from microfilm. She was living and teaching at the University of Charleston for a term.

There were four faculty apartments in this one small building. And fortunately, everybody was away for the weekend. Because I could then record it on tape instead of writing it down. Because recording it on tape would have disturbed the other people. Recording it on tape, I could do it so much faster.
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I was having a fine time. I was being Mother Jones. I was out there doing it.

You were walking up and down in your apartment, reading Mother Jones' speeches into your tape recorder?

I certainly was! And another thing! You know, it was about six o-clock in the morning, and there was a knock on the door. And I thought, Oh my God. So I went to the door, and I opened it. One of the people had come back early. And he was standing there in his pajamas. And he said, "Mary Lee, for God's sake, start that revolution or shut up!" (laughs)

So here's Mother Jones - about to make a speech in a barn to the wives of the strikers.

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In another five minutes, the barn was nearly full. The women clutched together, Italians on one side, hillbillies on another. They looked toward the feed box, waiting for her to begin. And she lt them look at shuffle, long enough to see a pretty little lady, more like a schoolteacher or somebody's aunt than the hellcat they expected.

She started out low and easy, just like they were having a talk over the fence. "Now, all us women," she said so low the ones in the back had to crane their necks as if that helped them hear her.
She could see them in the half dark, necks stretched like chickens about the be fed.

Well, by God, she felt ready to scatter her words like grain "Now, we know what a strike is, better than the men. We're the ones got to keep a bunch of tents clean and our youngens fed and do our washing and ironing best we can. We're the ones watch our babies' bellies swell with not enough to eat and see our men brought in and beat up by thugs or worse.

"Worse?" It was time for her voice to rise. "Is that there worse than seeing them brought back mashed in the mine and no compensation?" Several of the women in the back began to nod, but not the ones in front. They were self-conscious still, too near the lights. "Is it worse than being born by a company doctor when he's sober or when he's got the time? Is it worse than seeing your younguns schooled in a company school four months a year, and your boy's dragged out to slave in the breaker shed soon as you quit changing their didies? No! Nothing's worse.

"I've seen the rising generation, yes, the little ones, yes, the babes. Yes, look to the little ones. Look to the assaulted women!"

One woman said AMEN, like she was in church, and somebody else said, "Hush up, there."

"I feel inspiration in me. I feel inspiration like I never felt before, from you women tonight." It was time to ring the chimes. Mother let go. Her voice pounded the barn walls. "The womanhood of this valley shall not be beaten, robbed and violated like you was tonight by a bunch of company bloodhounds. Never more!" She paused for the Amens, the Yes, yeses she knew would come. Always did come from the Baptists and the Holy Rollers. They caught the Amens from each other. Nobody said Hush.

"Nevermore will you be married by a company preacher, owned by a company store put in a company house ain't fit for nothing but a hog, ready to fall in on your head. buried on company land. Your loved ones can't even put flowers on your grave if there's a strike. And your men are on a yellow dog contract, says they get set out if they stand up for their rights.

"Never more will the operators steal your men's labor by docking their load by thousands of tons of coal a year." She heard one of the Italian women translate to some others. "And the church." She let them have their

little stir at that. "Now, I don't say nothing about your church as such. But it ain't your church. It's company church. Why, you can't even use it to get buried from when there's a strike. It don't belong to God. Why, it belongs to the company with a company Jesus.

"I set in one of those churches and I seen $1,600 of your money sent out to teach Chinese heathens about Jesus. Well that company Jesus don't know no more about you than a dog does its father. Jesus never saw a penny of it and never will. You don't need no company Jesus up this holler. You've got the United Mine Workers!

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Now, were those Mother Jones' words?

That was Mother Jones language. And many of Mother Jones phrases. But I had to learn Mother Jones like you learn a language. Then I was free to make a Mother Jones speech.

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38 *People make at those turning points in history, choices that often require courage. Mary Lee looks for such people who might have something valuable to say to us today. In the late 1990s, she published* I, Roger Williams, *a book the Los Angeles Times called "a beautiful work of art." Roger Williams founded Rhode Island, the first American colony that allowed religious freedom. He stayed true to the ideals he brought over from England in the 1700s.*

All Americans seem to know about him right now is that he was kicked out of Massachusetts Bay Colony, that he was a friend of the Indians, that he was kicked out in the snow of winter, a little Puritan in a black hat, sitting in the snow, surrounded by Indians.

He was kicked out because he refused to participate in the official religion.

And his deep, deep belief, which he believed came from God, his deep belief was that your religion's your own business. And the state, when it meddles in it, it's bad for the church and bad for the state.

You said there was another reason.

He told them that they ought to pay the Indians for the land they were grabbing. This was shocking! It's like Casablanca. They were shocked, shocked! There was land-stealing going on here!

After Roger Williams was kicked out in the snow he did manage to establish Rhode Island colony.

39 And Massachusetts and Connecticut tried to destroy that colony over and over and over again. He finally got a charter, which was the first one, he thought, in the world where a man could not be arrested or persecuted for his conscience. Where state and church were separate.

Like West Virginia, Rhode Island was poorer in material things than its neighbors. But they had something worth more than the material wealth of the other states, Roger Williams said. A golden treasure, he called it. Here he is as an old man, reflecting.

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The golden treasure that we have here is far beyond their riches. For we are still the only colony in all the world that I know where it is wrote into our charter that no person should be molested or questioned for matters of conscience, so they be loyal and keep the civil peace. So we should give up land and what men call success before we part with such a treasure.
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He worries that, if people forget what it is like to live without this freedom, they will lose it.

40 *>>*
And I tell who will listen anymore. For they have so long took this jewel for granted. But sometimes I fear an old man's fear, that they value it no longer… How can I still convince these young ones who have not know the brutality of persecution for conscience? The prisons, the beatings, the hangings, the maimings, the exiles? Not only in our old corrupted England, but in New England as well. And to this day. Why, if the Virgin Mary were in New Haven, they would hang her for adultery.
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That's Roger Williams speaking. I think it's Mary Lee Settle speaking too.

Well, it's me and him. It's him and me. Him and I. It's Roger Mary Lee Williams.

Mary Lee feels that I Roger, Williams completes what she hoped to say in the Beulah Quintet.

I asked Mary Lee if she could sing the song, "Oh Beulah Land," where she got her title for The Beulah Quintet.

(sings a capella) Oh Beulah Land, sweet Beulah land. As on the highest mount I stand, I look away across the sea where mansions are prepared for me and view the shining glory shore, my heaven, my home, forevermore. *(sighs)*

It means a lot to you, doesn't it?

It's the Beulah Quintet. That hope, that constant hope.

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